

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 18, 2020

Vice President Mike Pence  
Chairman  
White House Coronavirus Task Force  
15 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Vice President Pence,

Thank you for your leadership in heading up the Coronavirus Task Force addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. We write to ask for your help in securing personal protective equipment (PPE) and an effective testing apparatus for Federal and cooperating wildland firefighters and federal law enforcement personnel tasked with wildfire response. We want to be sure there are mechanisms in place through the Task Force to allocate PPE and testing kits for these first responders during the wildfire season, which is expected to be especially challenging in this new COVID-19 environment.

To date this year, over 15,000 fires have already burned more than 333,000 acres, and the estimates are for an incredibly active fire year as summer approaches. The U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior are working to adapt their planning and approaches to COVID-19 guidelines, in order to safeguard the health of firefighters and all of the support staff that are required in fire mobilization. This includes a new requirement for PPE specifically for protecting them from the transmission of COVID-19.

This will be a herculean effort, and we have provided funding through regular and supplemental appropriations for the provision of PPE and other measures to protect the firefighters working to protect life and property on the fire line. Peak fire season comes closer every day. However, it is our understanding that the supply of PPE in the Federal interagency inventories does not meet the expected need, and firefighters are having trouble acquiring additional PPE on their own. We also understand that many of the available testing methods may not be conducive for wide scale use.

We request that the Coronavirus Task Force work with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, which includes the Forest Service and Department of the Interior, as well as state foresters, tribal organizations, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to ensure that the national and regional inventories of gear are full, and to prioritize development of an appropriate testing method, so that wildland firefighters have the necessary equipment to protect themselves from COVID-19.

First, we want to avoid a scenario in which the State, local, and volunteer firefighters on an incident have access to adequate PPE while the Federal firefighters working on the same fire do not. We understand that a number of state and local fire departments have been successful at acquiring additional PPE for their firefighters from various sources. We request that you direct

the Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy to work with the account specialists from such sources to support the needs of Federal firefighters. We also ask that the Task Force, including FEMA and its partner agencies coordinating the federal interagency response to COVID-19, transfer an appropriate level of Federal PPE supplies to Federal firefighter caches as has been done for other federal agencies.

Second, we ask that resources be used to develop and support an effective system of COVID-19 testing tailored to protecting firefighter health and maintaining the cohesiveness of federal wildland fire response. This includes ensuring that state health agencies in geographic regions forecast for significant wildfire activity are supplied with enough test kits to cover the influx of out-of-state Federal firefighters. Some fire camps number in the many hundreds of seasonal firefighters and support staff, with thousands having worked in other camps across the nation throughout the summer. Wildland fires often occur in rural and remote areas, and already-taxed rural and tribal health services should not be expected to have the resources to manage COVID-19 cases coming from an active fire camp or when crews arrive in their hometowns after demobilizing from a fire.

Firefighters and fire support staff put their lives on the line every day to protect us, and we need to make every effort to protect them from this virus, so they can safely fight fires and return to their families when the fires are out. Thank you for your attention to this request and please let us know if we can provide additional support or funding for these concerns through legislation.

Sincerely,



Tom Udall  
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator



Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator

cc: Secretary Sonny Perdue, Department of Agriculture  
Secretary Alex Azar, Department of Health and Human Services  
Acting Secretary Chad Wolf, Department of Homeland Security  
Secretary David Bernhardt, Department of the Interior  
Chief Vicki Christiansen, U.S. Forest Service  
Administrator Pete Gaynor, Federal Emergency Management Agency