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United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150
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July 30, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Rollins and Secretary Burgum:

Wildfire season is well underway, particularly across the Western United States. Much of the West is predicted to experience higher-than-normal fire behavior through October, and 44 large fires are currently uncontained.¹ With wildfire season likely to continue for several more months, I am extremely concerned by reports that staff reductions have required the deployment of fire personnel to fill administrative gaps, leaving fire crews understaffed and overwhelmed.

According to recent reports, firings, buyouts, and other personnel changes have led to gross understaffing at both the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior responsible for fire prevention and response, forcing firefighters to wear multiple hats. In addition to carrying out their own duties, firefighters reportedly have been thrown into serving in administrative and janitorial roles—ranging from cleaning campground bathrooms to answering front desk calls to mowing lawns.²

This situation is the opposite to that described by Chief Tom Schultz in his “Wildfire Priority” memorandum, dated July 16, 2025, relating to making staff with ‘red card’ qualifications available for firefighting duties. As you know, thousands of staff with red cards left the agencies this year due to the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP). If those personnel roles and responsibilities now must be filled by firefighters at the height of fire season, then the DRP was not only inefficient but has materially threatened public safety.

In light of these concerns, please provide responses to the following questions by August 14, 2025:

1. Since January 20, 2025, have your Departments conducted a review or assessment to understand the extent to which staffing gaps exist for firefighting personnel positions? Have you conducted a similar review or assessment on the staffing gaps for firefighting support staff, such as aircraft inspectors, dispatchers, or public information officers? If so, please provide a copy of those reviews or assessments.

¹ “National Fire News,” National Interagency Fire Center, <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/nfn>.

² “As US wildfires rage, Trump staff cuts force firefighters to clean toilets, critics say,” Reuters, July 21, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/>; “The Forest Service Claims It’s Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs,” ProPublica, July 22, 2025. <https://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season>; “US faces alarming firefighter shortage during peak wildfire season, data reveals,” The Guardian, July 22, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/us-firefighter-shortage-wildfires>.

2. You both have noted that your Departments are on pace to achieve their firefighter staffing goals for 2025, but multiple reports indicate extreme gaps in the staffing levels of firefighters, particularly those with enough experience to lead a crew or direct incident response. Please describe the number of firefighters at each General Schedule pay category for this fire year compared with the 10-year average.
3. To what extent has the Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3426 “Ensuring National Parks Are Open and Accessible”³ contributed to the need to assign wildland firefighters to administrative or custodial roles?
4. Please provide the following data:
 - a. The total number of firefighters who have been assigned to administrative or support roles since January 20, 2025. In responding this question, please provide a listing of all non-fire related roles firefighters have been assigned to carry out.
 - b. The total number of firefighters who have been assigned to serve in maintenance roles since January 20, 2025.
 - c. The total number of fire team support staff who have departed the Department or have agreed to early retirement or entered into a DRP since January 20, 2025. In responding to this question, provide information for each category listed and for each agency.

In March, you signed a Joint Memorandum committing to work together to “ensure that wildland fire personnel have the resources, training, and support to work under safe conditions and to effectively carry out their wildland fire management mission.”⁴ Since then, you have made assurances that you have the appropriate staff to meet current and future wildfire challenges. However, these recent news reports cast doubt on those assurances.

We look forward to your timely responses to these important questions. Should you have any questions about this request, please contact my staff at (202) 224-4971.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Energy and Natural
Resources

³ “Secretarial Order 3426: Ensuring National Parks are Open and Accessible,” Department of the Interior, <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order/so-3426-ensuring-national-parks-are-open-and-accessible>.

⁴ “Joint Memo: 2025 Direction to Wildland Fire Leadership,” Secretary Doug Burgum, Department of the Interior, and Secretary Brooke Rollins, Secretary of Agriculture, May 20, 2025. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/joint-memo-doi-052025.pdf>