

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4705

March 29, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

I am writing to follow-up on our conversation during the hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on March 9, 2017. During the hearing, we discussed your agencies' response to the wildfires that have caused unprecedented damage throughout the Pacific Northwest during the summers of 2014 and 2015. These fires have cost lives, destroyed homes, threatened communities, and jeopardized the livelihood of thousands. We urge you to use your Department's response programs, particularly the Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) program, to fund the short-term and long-term post-fire recovery needs of the Pacific Northwest Tribal communities.

The historic number of large fires has resulted in a catastrophic loss of vegetation that has exposed hundreds of thousands of acres to soil erosion. As rain has returned to the Pacific Northwest after these fires, runoff from burned areas has sent damaging amounts of sediment into streams, rivers, and reservoirs. The runoff also continues to cause flooding that threatens homes, communities, and water infrastructure.

A specific concern that has been raised by the Tribal community is securing and restoring the economic value of those lands held in trust for them that have recently burned. For example, the Colville Tribes have 660,000 acres of land in Washington that are managed for commercial timber. Of those 660,000 acres, 130,000 acres burned in 2015's devastating Tunk and North Star fires. These areas for decades have been managed for regular timber yields, which provide a major stream of revenue for the Tribes. This revenue supports vital services for the Tribes. Unfortunately, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has relayed to the Tribes of the Pacific Northwest that its programs do not have sufficient resources to respond to the need brought about by recent extreme fire years. This is unacceptable.

The BAR program is specifically in place to help communities address this concern. Post-fire teams at the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture have conducted assessments of the areas that were impacted by these fires and have prescribed emergency stabilization treatments to mitigate the threat of erosion, deforestation, and general degradation of the natural environment.

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I understand that the BAR program currently maintains a carryover balance of about \$11 million. Given the needs for reforestation, soil stabilization, and other post-fire rehabilitation practices on Pacific Northwest Tribal lands and because of our Trust responsibility, which requires us to assist Tribes in these efforts, I am requesting that you prioritize the remaining BAR program funds for Northwest Tribes. We have long underfunded Tribal forestry, and the Tribes are now suffering from the results of those decisions. We should give priority to supporting the Tribes as they work to recover from the impacts of wildfire and uphold our obligations.

The carryover funding should be used first to assist Tribes. Congress has provided you authority in its appropriations to make that decision and allocate the remaining BAR funding in that manner. If the carryover BAR funds are not spent directly on assisting Tribes, I would like to know on what else they are spent. Please provide me with the amount of carryover balance in the BAR program (across your Bureaus) as of the date of this letter. Also, please provide me with a table listing all of the Department's obligations incurred using the carryover BAR funding since the date of this letter, accompanied by your rationale as to why each of these obligations was more important than funding restoration work on the resources you hold in Trust for Federally-recognized Tribes.

I have long warned about risks of wildfire to our communities and to the land management agencies. The dangers that these fires pose continue beyond their extinguishment. I am deeply concerned about the future livelihood of the communities affected by these fires. We must make sure we have the resources necessary to restore our forests and lands and protect our people and communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

cc:

Mr. Michael S. Black
Acting Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs
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Mr. Bryan Rice
Director
Office of Wildland Fire

Mr. James Bowmer
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Mr. Myron Hotinger
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