

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 2, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St., NW  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Bernhardt and Secretary Perdue:

I write to express concern about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on wildland fire management and urge you to adopt an aggressive initial attack strategy for the 2020 fire season.

Currently, the federal government along with state and local governments across the country are mobilized to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. And now those same government entities, already stretched thin, are preparing to fight wildland fire in a world where COVID-19 still rages. This problem could be particularly pronounced for regions like the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, which only received 40 percent of its anticipated snowpack levels this winter.

One approach to this unprecedented challenge is simple: put fires out fast and early. It is not an uncommon practice for some incident commanders to employ suppression strategies to meet resource restoration objectives by allowing wildland fire to burn for a period time when the threat to life and property is low. Fire is a natural part of many forest ecosystems occurring in regular intervals that vary according to forest type, and it can be beneficial to utilize wildland fire to reduce fuel loads much like a prescribed burn is used as a tool to reduce wildfire severity. Unfortunately, this is not a year in which we can afford to assign firefighters to monitor and manage such wildland fires. Given the unprecedented conditions in this fire season, it is essential to utilize federal resources for immediate wildfire suppression to the greatest extent practicable.

Aerial firefighting will be an important part of an aggressive initial attack strategy. It is well known that a swift initial response can help contain a fire until ground crews can arrive to put it out. Some recent studies have shown that on average a fire can be contained within 24 hours if an air tanker is deployed on that fire within about four to six hours. Conversely, fires that do not receive aerial assets for a period greater than 72 hours are more likely to take weeks to achieve containment. I encourage you to ensure a sufficient number of aircraft are available to play a greater role on initial attack this fire season.

Finally, as you are fully aware, a healthy and safe work environment for wildland

firefighters is paramount. This season, these heroes will be waging a war against wildfires in at-risk communities in addition to a pandemic that threatens their families. I understand that both Departments are producing guidance to ensure the public health and use of social distancing of firefighters who are deployed in the field. You are no doubt managing firefighter safety as a top priority and I encourage you to continue doing so.

Thank you for your attention to my concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Murkowski". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "M".

Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator