

April 22, 2024

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

America's wildfire crisis continues to worsen. As your office recently reported, wildfires destroyed more than 12,000 homes, businesses, and other structures each year, on average, between 2017 and 2021. This is more than three times as many than the preceding 5-year period. These wildfires have killed hundreds of people, including 85 fatalities in the 2018 Camp Fire alone, and burned millions of acres. The cost of suppressing wildfires has also risen, from an annual average of \$371 million between 1985 and 1990 to \$2.85 billion between 2018 and 2022 (an increase of approximately 300% after inflation).

The increasingly devastating outcomes from wildfires in the United States requires a change in how the federal government prepares for, responds to, and recovers from wildfires. Federal agencies have long recognized the need to significantly increase the pace and scale of forest management to reduce the extreme risk posed by wildfires. Nevertheless, efforts to reduce wildfire risk have not been undertaken at the scale necessary to address the crisis. The Forest Service is now recommending that hazardous fuels reduction treatments occur on 50 million acres across the United States over the next 10 years. Although the federal land management agencies have been provided with significant resources to enable this work, both in additional funding and new authorities, increases in proactive forest management have been modest.

In this context, we are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct assessments of the following issues:

- **Forest management.** Active forest management can improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk—all while supporting local economies. Congress has provided authorities and funding to the Forest Service in an effort to speed up these projects. However, the agency continues to face questions about the scale and pace of its timber and hazardous fuels management program. We have heard concerns about the extent to which the Forest Service is using the available resources. For example, the Forest Service's treatment target for Fiscal Year 2025 is lower than the number of acres treated in Fiscal Year 2023. We ask that your office conduct a review of the Forest Service's use of existing authorities and existing programs that support forest management projects across ownership boundaries. We also request that your office identify improvements to increase the flexibility of federal funds to facilitate cross-boundary forest management work.
- **Land Management Plans:** Of the 128 Land Management Plans maintained by the Forest Service, approximately 100 are more than 15 years old. These plans provide overall management directives and lay out guidelines for appropriate activities and uses in the forest. It is critical that the Forest Service regularly revises these plans to reflect changing forest conditions, public uses, and Congressional

direction. The Forest Service has created new regional teams dedicated to updating land management plans, rather than asking each National Forest System unit to lead the efforts individually. We ask that your office review the Forest Service's new model for updating land management plans and compare it with strategies employed by other federal land management agencies to identify options for improvement and streamlining.

- **Firefighting equipment.** Technology such as Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and communications devices are critical safety equipment for firefighters working to suppress wildfires or conduct prescribed fires. However, these systems have not been universally implemented or adequately maintained. A recent report from the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology identified improved communications and situational awareness tools as the number one technological priority for firefighters. Congress provided federal agencies with funding to purchase such equipment, including \$15 million through the *John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act* (P.L. 116-9) and \$40 million through IIIJA. However, it is unclear if the Forest Service has purchased any equipment with these funds. We ask that your office review what steps the agency has taken to assess and acquire this equipment and any reasons for delay.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters. If you have any questions or need more information, please contact Sean Mullin or Kristin Sleeper at (202) 224-4971.

Sincerely,

Joe Manchin III
Chair
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate

John Barrasso, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate