



STATE OF WASHINGTON

May 19, 2016

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate  
S-230, U.S. Capitol Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul Ryan  
Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives  
H-232, U.S. Capitol Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate  
S-221, U.S. Capitol Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives  
H-204, U.S. Capitol Building  
Washington, DC 10515

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Ryan, Leader Reid and Leader Pelosi:

We write to you today to once again add our voices to the growing bipartisan chorus calling for Congress to take action to end “fire borrowing,” and provide the U.S. Forest Service with the resources it needs to effectively improve forest health and to respond to increasingly devastating wildfire seasons. Congress should empower this agency to pay for wildfire response in much the same way that other federal agencies respond to other types of disasters, by accessing emergency funding once disaster costs surpass an average annual threshold.

Washington State has experienced devastating back-to-back wildfire seasons, each setting a state record, and together taking four lives, scorching communities, and costing hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and fire response expenditures. While we hope that 2016 will portend less devastation, we continue to prepare for the worst. And the 2016 fire season has already begun in earnest; according to the USDA, this year has already seen five times more acres burned across the country than at this time last year. Also, unfortunately, we know that climate models predict hotter and drier summers and increasing numbers of acres burned in coming fire seasons.

In order to help Washington, other western states and the whole country to better prevent, respond to and recover from wildfire disasters, all levels of government must recognize the tremendous threat that they pose to our communities. The federal government has an essential role to play, led by the Forest Service. However, the Forest Service is currently handicapped in its abilities to fulfill its dual mission to both maintain the health of federal forestlands and to suppress wildfires that affect those lands and their surroundings.

Over the last two years, the Forest Service has been forced to spend significantly more than Congress has initially appropriated for it to suppress wildfires. These are important and unavoidable expenditures, but they have forced the agency to raid money from other program accounts, many of

which are intended to improve forest health and prevent the very sorts of conditions that can exacerbate fires. While Congress has provided some emergency appropriations for the agency, it has not been enough, and the annual shortfalls in funding and uncertainty around transfers leave the agency unable to plan its investments effectively. According to the USDA, wildfire suppression activities consumed around 60 percent of the Forest Service budget in federal fiscal year 2016. To put that into perspective, twenty-five years ago wildfire suppression costs were only around 13 percent of the agency's annual budget.

As one example of how continued federal fire borrowing is hurting our state: in 2014, a large wildfire burned through an area of forestland in the Okanagan-Wenatchee National Forest system that had been planned for hazard reduction treatments. Had those treatment activities received the funding to proceed as planned, those fuels would not have been in such a condition so as to contribute, as they did, to the fire's ferocity. Had the Forest Service been able to carry out these treatment activities, it is conceivable that this particular fire would not have consumed so many acres in our state.

Clearly there is a growing need for increasing our commitment to wildfire suppression and prevention, and to funding these activities in a smarter way. Before the bulk of the 2016 wildfire season, we strongly urge your committees to support legislation that will put an end to fire borrowing, and finally allow the Forest Service to treat wildfires similar to how other federal agencies pays for the costs of other natural disasters that impact other American communities, such as hurricanes and floods.

This needed reform carries broad bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress and is also supported by the Western Governors Association and the National Association of State Foresters. We also appreciate the vocal and bipartisan support that this legislative solution has received from members of the Washington Congressional Delegation.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Very truly yours,



Jay Inslee  
Governor



Peter Goldmark  
Commissioner of Public Lands

cc: Members of the Washington State Congressional Delegation  
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chairman, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
The Honorable Rob Bishop, Chairman, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources  
The Honorable Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources  
The Honorable Tom Vilsack, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture  
The Honorable Sally Jewell, U.S. Secretary of Interior  
The Honorable Thomas L. Tidwell, Chief, U.S. Forest Service