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June 10, 2025

A personalized copy of this letter was sent to 13 Senators and 15 Representatives on June 10 or June 17.

Dear _____:

We believe that the proposal to consolidate all federal firefighting operations into a single agency at the Department of the Interior (DOI) or the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would be a costly mistake. On the National Forests, our forest managers have an intimate knowledge of the landscape on which they work. That knowledge isn't just important for the best management of those lands but is also crucial for effective firefighting.

Wildfire management is more than extinguishing fires. The critical linkage between fire suppression and forest management, including fuels reduction and prescribed fire, must be maintained. Severing forest management and forest managers from fire suppression will make firefighting less safe and put communities at greater risk.

Under the current organizational structure, we understand that the Forest Service successfully suppresses around 98% of new ignitions on agency lands that it wants to immediately suppress. This number would not include new starts in more remote, backcountry areas that normally have a lower suppression priority and can have beneficial use. The common denominator of many of the remaining 2% that become costly and destructive large fires is that they are frequently driven by extreme weather events that often include high winds. A single, large suppression organization under DOI or DHS is unlikely to improve on this statistic.

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While the suppression organization is important, there is an urgent need to address the root causes of catastrophic wildfire, which include overly dense forests, development in the wildland-urban interface, and changing weather patterns. Reducing the wildfire threat will require more forest thinning including timber harvest, if done correctly. Increased mechanical treatments, and the application of lower intensity fires to build forest resilience are also key elements to success. Continuing to emphasize fire suppression efforts without front-end investment in treatments across large, forested landscapes will not address the catastrophic wildfire problem. Adequate agency staffing is key to successfully addressing all these variables.

The single agency suppression proposal overlooks the critical role of many thousands of Forest Service employees who assist in firefighting efforts but are not primarily firefighters. The Administration has dismissed many of these employees or encouraged and accepted their resignations. Others could be targeted in future reduction in force.

An additional consideration is the sheer complexity, cost and time required to organize staff and stand up a new organization. One calendar year will not accomplish this merger. This would be especially problematic and risky during an ongoing fire season.

Rather than spending billions and taking years to create a single suppression organization, we recommend that Congress and the agencies focus our limited resources on measures that would address the root causes of catastrophic wildfire and ensure suppression and prevention strategies are integrated with broader forest management goals.

Sincerely,

Steve Ellis

Steve Ellis, Chair
National Association of Forest Service Retirees