

Dear Retirees,

I hope this letter continues to find you and your families safe and healthy during this global pandemic. I believe that we in Region 5, and the Forest Service as a whole, have adapted well to this national emergency as it has unfolded. Our priority remains the safety and well-being of our employees and the public we serve, while maintaining emergency response capability in wildland fire management and law enforcement using appropriate risk management strategies, current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and local health and safety guidelines.

We have had 74 personnel in Region 5 test positive or deemed “presumed positive” for COVID-19 since March, and 65 of those 74 have recovered. I believe that our early and proactive mitigation measures have made a difference, as well as continuous education and reporting procedures from our R5 COVID Emergency Response Team (CERT) and follow-through from employees. We continue to spend time talking about employee health and safety during the pandemic, especially now that we are in peak season of the fire year.

Fire and Aviation Management

Fire activity has picked up over the last few weeks, as anticipated. As of Thursday, August 13, 2020, 831 wildfires have burned 115,352 acres of National Forest System lands in California. 6,325 wildfires have burned 283,850 acres across all jurisdictions in the state. Both Northern and Southern California are in Preparedness Level (PL) 3 – the nation is in PL 4.

To protect fire personnel and the public, our management actions will be focused on both reducing the spread of the virus and the impacts of large catastrophic wildfires. Our approach of a safe and aggressive initial attack strategy, with enhanced aircraft capability, has been successful to this point in keeping a vast majority of fire starts from becoming large and destructive wildfires. The more success we have at initial attack, the more we can reduce firefighter and community exposure to wildfire, smoke, and the virus.

To complement our initial attack strategy, we initiated a state-wide ban on campfires outside of developed campgrounds in May. Due to increased visitor use across the Region, we have unfortunately seen a significant increase in fire starts from unattended campfires. Should we continue to see this trend, we will likely extend the state-wide ban on campfires on all National Forest System lands in California in the near future. I fully understand that these fire restrictions impact the visitor experience in the short-term but we need to take additional precautions to protect communities and firefighters during this unprecedented pandemic. We experienced a small fire on the Angeles when recreation visits were high. The chaos that ensued for evacuations was only a glimpse of what we could experience if it were a large fire. I remain very concerned.

Mitigating COVID-19 transmission has been an additional risk factor in firefighting operations this year. Our plans address exposure prevention, exposure mitigation, equipment and facility

care, and strategies for ensuring resource availability. We also monitor how other Regions handle COVID-19 impacts to wildland fire. Capturing Lessons Learned protocols are in place, helping to inform fire managers on response to operational scenarios that may be encountered.

We recognize that this situation is fluid and change may be required. Wildland fire personnel are trained to quickly adapt during evolving situations and will be prepared for wildland fire suppression activities during the pandemic. Most firefighting will be in small groups dispersed in isolated camps for social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Recreation Management

As you are aware, people are seeking ways to get outside during this pandemic. Many have discovered or rediscovered their national forests. Increased visitor use has presented significant challenges as we try to protect employees on the front line, and at the same time, maintain safe recreational opportunities for the public. Our approach to these challenges has been closures in specific areas where large gatherings occur and where safety is compromised, ensuring all front line employees have the appropriate PPE and training to be safe in performing their duties, and reinforcing safety measures expected of visitors to keep recreation sites clean and reduce the spread of the virus. Some of these measures include:

- Pack out your trash and leave nothing behind. Practice leave no trace ethics
- Follow Statewide (CA) campfire restrictions - Igniting, building, maintaining, or using a campfire on National Forests in California remain prohibited, except for developed campgrounds and certain permitted facilities
- Maintain physical distance from others. Do not gather in groups, and follow the latest guidance from health officials on face coverings
- Check with local National Forests for any additional visitor guidance and fire restrictions in place for specific locations.

Recreating responsibly will help ensure that expanded access to recreational facilities, services, and opportunities continue. We ask for your help to continue getting this word out. This summer, we launched a Geographic Information System (GIS) map that provides the public with updated information on the status of campgrounds, day-use sites, picnic areas, and other designated recreation sites on national forests throughout California...before they travel. You can view the GIS map at <https://www.fs.fed.us/r5/webmaps/RecreationSiteStatus/>.

I was also very pleased with the signing of the Great American Outdoors Act, which will enable federal land managers to take aggressive steps to address deferred maintenance and other infrastructure projects on national forests and grasslands. It will allow us to deliver higher quality customer service, enhance the visitor experience, and serve as a major catalyst for rural economic development and employment opportunities through the projects funded and the resulting increase in tourism and recreation activity.

The Forest Service anticipates up to \$285 million nationally, and up to \$60 million regionally, on an annual basis over the next 5 years from the National Parks and Public Land Legacy

Restoration Fund. The bill also provides \$900 million annually to the USDA and DOI through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which will improve access to public lands, further strengthening the recreation economy based on national forests and grasslands. Recreation on national forest lands in California contributes over 2 billion dollars to the California economy. The agency is diligently working to provide priority lists to the Department regarding federal land acquisition and deferred maintenance projects on national forests and grasslands.

Land Management and Shared Stewardship

Finally, the Region is in the final stages to sign a Shared Stewardship Agreement with the State of California. This agreement formalizes our efforts in a statewide agreement that will enhance our efforts working with various state agencies over many years. The agreement will focus on sharing resources and prioritization of where to conduct fuel treatments to protect communities. It will allow ingress and egress during evacuation situations, along with emphasizing the reduction of hazardous fuels to protect critical infrastructure such as powerlines and water conveyance.

I am so proud of every employee in the Pacific Southwest Region and the agency for how we have responded to these crises and all of the things going on around us. We have had insightful discussions about where we are as a nation, an agency, and as individuals. The year 2020 has proven to be unlike any other, and I am confident we will make it through the challenges we face. Thank you for your continued interest in how Forest Service employees are doing and what they are accomplishing in Region 5.

Stay safe and healthy.

Randy