Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 27, 2022

Mr. Randy Moore
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Moore,

We write to strongly urge the Forest Service to increase the pace and scale of desperately needed forest management activities. Restoring the public's trust in the safety and efficacy of forest management activities on National Forest System lands is particularly important given the drought conditions currently afflicting the western United States. Alarmingly, as of June 15, 2022, over 2.7 million acres in the United States has burned, outpacing every fire season of the last decade.[1] Unfortunately, a substantial portion of this acreage burned as a result of escaped prescribed burns initiated by the Forest Service. Decades of mismanagement have left our forests overgrown and fire-prone, and it is vital that we use essential tools – including prescribed burns – safely and effectively to restore these landscapes to natural fire intervals. This work must be done carefully and with the confidence that these burns will not cause the very catastrophic wildfires they seek to prevent.

On May 20, 2022, less than six months after announcing an aggressive new strategy to reduce wildfire risk on federal lands, the Forest Service announced a pause on prescribed fire operations on all National Forest System lands in order to conduct a 90-day review of protocols, decision support tools, and practices.[2] This unilateral pause came after the news that the colossal 325,340-acre Hermits Peak Fire in New Mexico, which merged with the nearby Calf Canyon Fire, became the largest and most destructive fire in state history due to a poorly executed prescribed fire conducted by the Santa Fe National Forest.[3] This fire has already destroyed 903 structures and accumulated $227 million in suppression costs.[4] Concerningly, the Forest Service greenlit the prescribed burn that sparked this fire despite ongoing severe drought conditions, several red flag warnings issued in the days leading up to the fire, and forecasts of 25 mile-per-hour winds and nine percent humidity on the day of the fire.[5] Additionally, fire investigators recently determined that the Calf Canyon Fire was also started by a Forest Service pile burn originally conducted in January 2022 that reignited and spread quickly due to high winds.[6] In

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[1] National Interagency Fire Center, "National Fire News," https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/nfn. Accessed on June 15, 2022.
[2] U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, "Statement of Forest Service Chief Randy Moore Announcing Pause of Prescribed Fire Operations on National Forest System Lands," May 20, 2022, https://www.fs.usda.gov/news/releases/statement-forest-service-chief-randy-moore-announcing-pause-prescribed-fire.
[3] InciWeb – Incident Information System, "Hermits Peak Fire," https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/8049/. Accessed on June 15, 2022. The Washington Post, "New Mexico blaze is now largest wildfire in state history," Bryan Pietsch and Jason Samenow, May 17, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/17/calf-canyon-hermits-peak-fire-new-mexico/.
[4] National Interagency Coordination Center, "National Interagency Coordination Center Incident Management Situation Report" June 2, 2022, https://www.nifc.gov/nicc/sitreprt.pdf.
[5] Source NM, "Forecasts showed 25 mph gusts on the day U.S. Forest Service ignited prescribed burn," Patrick Lohmann, May 10, 2022, https://sourcenm.com/2022/05/10/forecasts-showed-25-mph-gusts-on-the-day-u-s-forest-service-ignited-prescribed-burn/. InciWeb – Incident Information System, "Hermits Peak Fire," https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/8049/. Accessed on June 2, 2022.
[6] U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, "Fire Investigators Determine Cause of Calf Canyon Fire," Julie Anne Overton, May 27, 2022, https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/santafe/news-events/?cid=FSEPRD1027912.

Colorado, a similar situation occurred in May 2022 when the Forest Service conducted a prescribed burn despite extremely dry and windy conditions, resulting in a fire that destroyed one family's home and an estimated $1.6 million in suppression costs.[7]

Combined with the consistent lack of appropriate forest management, the unprecedented drought facing the West has further weakened our national forests and left them extremely vulnerable to wildfire. The West is currently suffering through the most extreme drought on record with over 76 percent of the land under severe drought conditions or worse.[8] Further, recent research demonstrated that portions of our nation are facing the driest conditions in 1,200 years.[9] This reality must inform not only our firefighting approach, but also the types of forest management treatments that are utilized during this time of extreme volatility.

When used correctly, prescribed burns are an essential forest management tool used by the Forest Service, local managers, and private landowners to thin overgrown forest lands and reduce the threat of wildfires for communities across the United States. Prescribed fires are supported by extensive scientific research, but they must be used judiciously during drought conditions and based on a thorough assessment of risk factors before they are initiated.[10] We agree that a rigorous review must be conducted in order to assess the failures of Forest Service's prescribed fire operations. With this mandated nationwide pause, however, land managers across the country are now deprived of a critical tool that – when used safely – could currently be aiding efforts to reduce wildfire risk, restore forest health, and create resilient landscapes. With communities throughout the West already amidst a record-breaking wildfire season, we cannot afford to be losing any tools that can help prevent catastrophic fires during this wildfire season and in the future.

Due to the imposed pause on prescribed burns, it is now more important than ever that the agency fully – and immediately – utilize other tools, such as mechanical thinning, to continue treating the millions of acres of forest land at risk of experiencing catastrophic wildfires. The importance of increased forest restoration thinning cannot be overstated, as scientists have shown it significantly improves drought resiliency in our forests by increasing both canopy moisture content and allowing for more snow accumulation on the ground in the winter.[11] Expanded mechanical thinning is also consistent with the agency's own findings in the "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis" strategy, which stated:

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[7] Montrose Press, "Forest Service says its prescribed burn caused Simms Fire," Katharhynn Heidelberg, June 1, 2022, https://www.montrosepress.com/free_access/forest-service-confirms-its-prescribed-burn-caused-simms-fire/article_6aa5b34a-e1ef-11ec-bc39-b7ca5e14107d.html.
The Denver Post, "Colorado wildfire updates: Simms fire near Ouray may have been sparked by prescribed burn," Sam Tabachnik, May 23, 2022, https://www.denverpost.com/2022/05/23/colorado-wildfire-updates-sims-fire/.

[8] Wall Street Journal, "Most of U.S. West Is in Severe Drought as Peak Wildfire Season Looms," Camille Bressange, Jim Carlton, and Taylor Umlauf, May 27, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-of-u-s-west-is-in-severe-drought-as-peak-wildfire-season-looms-11653659433.

[9] *Id.*

[10] Ecological Restoration Institute, Northern Arizona University, "Planning for and Implementing Prescribed Fire in Fire-Dependent Forests," Bruce Greco, June 2018, ERI White Paper—Issues in Forest Restoration, https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd624550.pdf.
Prairie Ecologist, "Should We Be Conducting Prescribed Fires During Drought?," Chris Helzer, March 12, 2013, https://prairieecologist.com/2013/03/12/should-we-be-conducting-prescribed-fires-during-drought/#:~:text=Because%20prescribed%20burning%20is%20inherently,resulting%20in%20hotter%2C%20faster%20fires.

[11] Nature News, "Thinning increases forest resiliency during unprecedented drought" Temuulen Sankey and Julia Tatum, May 31, 2022, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-12982-z.

> "Using fire and thinning together, however, provides the best opportunity for reducing risk and moderating fire behavior. With a risk-informed approach, a forest thinning is often needed first to reduce the number of trees to something approaching the historical level a century ago. Then a low-intensity surface fire can follow—what professionals call a prescribed fire."[12]

Mechanical thinning remains an indispensable tool in the agency's toolbox. Because prescribed fires are not currently available for local land managers to utilize due to the mandated pause, we must accelerate thinning on forest lands to reduce the risk of wildfire and improve forest health.

It is clear the Forest Service has damaged the public's trust and must set in place procedures that will restore confidence in the agency to appropriately utilize prescribed burns, manage our fire-prone federal lands, and ensure communities are protected. The Forest Service must complete a comprehensive review of the misuse of prescribed fire in these cases and address program shortcomings as expeditiously as possible. Given the severity of the ongoing wildfire catastrophe, we also seek to understand the Forest Service's prescribed fire operations in greater detail and request a briefing on the 90-day review as well as the following documents. Please provide these documents as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. on July 11, 2022.

1. A document sufficient to describe the prescribed fires initiated by the Forest Service within the last five years that have resulted in wildfires. This document should address the prescribed fires that ignited the Hermits Peak, Calf Canyon, and Simms Fires, including the prescribed burn plans and details regarding the timing and execution under extreme weather conditions for each incident.

2. A document sufficient to describe standard operating procedures for the Forest Service's prescribed fire program, including how risk factors such as weather are assessed and weighed during decision making.

3. A document sufficient to describe all planned prescribed fire activities and associated locations impacted by the 90-day pause.

4. A document sufficient to describe the plan to make up for the prescribed fires that are delayed by the pause and maintain the agency's planned forest management goals once the pause is lifted.

5. A document sufficient to describe the prescribed fires that are planned following the expiration of the pause.

6. A document sufficient to describe how the pause will impact the Forest Service's "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis" strategy published in January 2022.

[12] U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America's Forests," January 2022, FS-1187a, https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Confronting-Wildfire-Crisis.pdf.

Please contact the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Minority staff at HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions about this request and to coordinate the delivery of your response to room 1329 of the Longworth House Office Building. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter and we look forward to continued coordination as we work together to responsibly restore health and resiliency to our forests through active forest management.

Sincerely,

Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources

Dan Newhouse
Chairman
Congressional Western Caucus

Yvette Herrell
Member of Congress

Russ Fulcher
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Blake Moore
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Pete Stauber
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Cliff Bentz
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Tom McClintock
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Bob Gibbs
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Doug LaMalfa
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Markwayne Mullin
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Chris Stewart
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Garret Graves
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Mariannette Miller-Meeks, M.D.
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Burgess Owens
Member of Congress

Matt Rosendale
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Enclosure