



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

December 17, 2015

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Mikulski:

The fiscal year (FY) 2016 omnibus bill pending in Congress provides the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service the base funding requested for the agency in the President's FY 2016 budget submission. It further includes additional funding for fire suppression and modest increases for hazardous fuel reduction and forest management work. While these funds are helpful, I am extremely disappointed that Congress did not enact a comprehensive fix to the wildland firefighting budget. A bipartisan and bicameral set of members worked hard to develop a proposal to comprehensively address the firefighting budget, while also providing management reforms. Had Congress enacted the final package being considered, the budget portions alone would have allowed the Forest Service to treat an estimated additional 1 million acres annually, producing another 300 million board feet annually.

The omnibus fails to provide a long-term solution to address the critical and growing problem of paying for catastrophic wildfire and instead leaves the Forest Service hobbled by the current untenable budget situation. In 2015, more than 56,000 fires burned 9.8 million acres, leading to the costliest fire season on record. The cost of the Forest Service's wildfire suppression reached a record \$243 million in a one-week period during the height of suppression activity in August 2015. The future trend will be hotter, longer, more severe, and ultimately more costly fire seasons. The Forest Service conservatively estimates that fire suppression will consume 67 percent of the Forest Service budget by 2025, a dramatic increase from 16 percent in 1995. Indeed, already in FY 2015, the agency spent well in excess of 60 percent of its budget on firefighting and fire-related activities. This directly impacts the Forest Service's ability to fund other critical work such as restoration that can reduce wildfire threat, drinking water area protection, and recreation investments, not just in the West, but across the country.

I am directing the Forest Service to aggressively use the funding provided in FY 2016 to support forest management, restoration, research, and partnership work that will help us get ahead of the catastrophic wildfire problem. The Forest Service will also aggressively focus on providing other services that the American public expects from this agency such as recreation, facilities maintenance, and invasive pest management. Further, I will not authorize transfers from

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restoration and resilience funding. The American public can no longer afford delays to forest restoration and other critical Forest Service activities caused by annual fire transfers. If the amount Congress appropriated in FY 2016 is not sufficient to cover fire suppression costs, Congress will need to appropriate additional funding on an emergency basis.

I hope there will be continued work to enact a bipartisan, bicameral, comprehensive solution to this continuing problem.

A similar letter is being sent to Chairman Thad Cochran, Chairman Harold Rogers, and Ranking Member Nita Lowey.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas J. Vilsack". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thomas" and last name "Vilsack" clearly legible.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

cc: Chairman Lisa Murkowski, Ranking Member Tom Udall, Chairman Ken Calvert, Ranking Member Betty McCollum