

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 25, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Haaland,

We urgently write concerning Oregon's rapidly growing needs for the 2024 wildfire season. Thank you for the response and resources your land management agencies have already provided to fight an unprecedented number of large fires in Oregon this July.

Across the state, Red Flag Warnings have been issued repeatedly, and temperatures have surpassed 100 degrees for multiple days creating difficult working conditions for firefighters and further drying out already heavy, dry fuel loads. The Pacific Northwest region jumped from Preparedness Level (PL) 3 to PL 5 in just four days.

While we acknowledge the capacity challenge federal agencies face, please continue to work quickly to secure additional resources for Oregon. It is encouraging to hear that our region is currently the top priority for initial attack nationally and that international crews will help bolster our wearying crews.

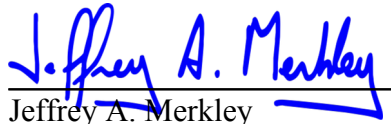
This request for support is one that we have heard directly from local officials and emergency personnel, particularly in Eastern Oregon. As one Incident Commander explained during a recent meeting, "everyone is stretched thin" across the state. The Oregon Department of Forestry and the Oregon State Fire Marshal have been working diligently to protect people and property from both human caused and lightning caused fires. Fire crews are working in remote, rural areas with poor communication infrastructure, often in steep and treacherous terrain. Local volunteers are beating back the fires while also watching their pastures burn and hoping their livestock can escape. Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) have admirably risen to the challenge to protect their communities, often defending their neighbors' properties at risk to their own homes.

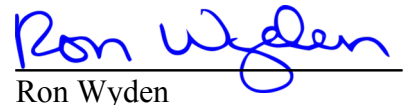
The partnership, collaboration, and respect between the agency fire crews and leaders and the community staff and volunteers are impressive to watch, and without that partnership, we would undoubtedly face even more difficulties. We encourage your agencies to continue that level of cooperation.

The immense fires actively burning in Oregon have already caused extensive damage, with losses of residences, utility poles, wildlife, farmlands, as well as livestock and feed. Governor Tina Kotek will soon be submitting multiple requests for USDA Secretarial disaster declarations for areas of Oregon that have already experienced extreme losses. We urge you to expedite review of those appeals. Please also encourage continued support by your agency staff on the ground in Oregon, as their services and resources will be greatly needed by a wide range of rural communities devastated by these fires.

Unfortunately, we have several more months of an intense wildfire season ahead of us. Current fires are expected to grow, even on the Durkee Fire which became the largest fire in the nation in just one week. Drought intensity is projected to continue increasing in the state, elevating the risk that more lightning strikes, as well as human caused ignitions, will spark significant fires. We stand ready to work with you to continue to support wildfire prevention, response, and recovery for all Oregonians and appreciate your efforts thus far.

Sincerely,


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator