

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

June 30, 2020

Vice President Michael R. Pence  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Vice President Pence:

As our nation progresses deeper into the 2020 wildfire season, we write to you in your capacity as head of the White House Coronavirus Task Force (Task Force) to immediately address the safety needs of American firefighters and the communities they serve.

Our nation's federal wildland firefighters are always prepared for the worst-case scenario, but the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges that require several coordinated federal actions. Specifically, we urge you to act swiftly to ensure firefighters have sufficient and consistent access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 testing; work with relevant federal and state agencies to develop a detailed strategy to ensure community safety in the event of mass evacuations; and support policies that fairly compensate firefighters for their service to our nation.

The most recent National Wildland Fire Potential Outlook, issued on June 1, 2020, by the National Interagency Fire Center, predicts that in the coming weeks and months, multiple regions across the country will enter their peak wildfire season. Over the next two months, the American Southwest will experience its peak fire season. At the same time, fire authorities predict higher-than-normal fire potential, beginning now and lasting through late fall, across much of California, Oregon, and portions of the Great Basin and northern Rocky Mountain regions.

In order to keep wildland firefighting crews as safe as possible this year, the federal government must significantly alter the way it has fought wildfires over the past decades. We ask that you direct relevant federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to take proactive steps to protect firefighters from contracting COVID-19, since exposure to wildfire smoke can impair firefighters' immune systems and leave them much more susceptible to intense cases of the virus. Moreover, while we commend fire officials' efforts to adjust the layout at fire base camps to accommodate physical distancing recommendations, we are nevertheless concerned about the potential for COVID-19 to spread in these settings among the wildland fire personnel

and rural communities. We ask that the Task Force ensure federal wildland firefighters working in areas that currently have or are expected to have heightened fire activity be given priority access to PPE and COVID-19 rapid tests for the duration of this fire season.

We also request that you work closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, which consists of representatives from each of the federal agencies tasked with overseeing wildland fires, to develop a detailed strategy to ensure the safety of both firefighters and civilians in the event of mass evacuations due to wildfires. While we understand that strategies and guidelines will need to be designed to fit local contexts, state and local leaders need to be able to develop a coordinated, national strategy. Historically, during mass evacuations due to fire threat, the Red Cross has stepped in, seeking and organizing large public facilities to keep people safe. This year, these tried-and-true methods will need to be altered to incorporate COVID-19 safety protocols. We ask that you work with the aforementioned federal agencies and state and local partners to ensure every community with significant wildland fire risk has a plan in place to safely execute a mass evacuation.


Given the known and unknown challenges that lie ahead for the remainder of this fire season, we also ask that you consider supporting policies that reflect the risks that firefighters are taking on behalf of communities across our nation, including policies to make federal wildland firefighters' salaries commensurate with their state counterparts.

Thank you for your commitment to our nation's federal wildland firefighters. We look forward to working with you and members of the Task Force to ensure these essential employees have the protections they need to keep our communities safe.

Sincerely,



Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress



Bruce Westerman  
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress



Doug LaMalfa  
Member of Congress

**Suzanne Bonamici**  
Member of Congress

**Anthony Brindisi**  
Member of Congress

**Julia Brownley**  
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**Tony Cárdenas**  
Member of Congress

**Jim Costa**  
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**TJ Cox**  
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**Anna G. Eshoo**  
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**Josh Harder**  
Member of Congress

**Jahana Hayes**  
Member of Congress

**Jared Huffman**  
Member of Congress

**Ann Kirkpatrick**  
Member of Congress

**Sheila Jackson Lee**  
Member of Congress

**Mark Takano**  
Member of Congress