

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

June 15, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
U.S. Capitol, H-232  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representative  
U.S. Capitol, H-204  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

As Congress works to develop and disburse immediate relief to communities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must also consider the investments needed to bring tens of millions of people back to work to rebuild a stronger, more sustainable economy. To this end, we write to you to ensure that any future legislative package focused on infrastructure, economic stimulus, and job creation include robust funds to address deferred maintenance and wildland fire preparedness needs in the U.S. National Forest System.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities across our nation have turned to National Forests as spaces to safely spend time outdoors while adhering to Centers for Disease Control (CDC) physical distancing guidelines. Additionally, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) roads and bridges are playing a key role in ensuring rural communities can safely reach grocery stores and hospitals during the pandemic. At the same time, our National Forest System is suffering from \$5.2 billion worth of backlogged repairs for roads and road bridges, trails, and facilities, which far exceeds the \$446 million included in the fiscal year 2019 USFS budget for infrastructure improvement and maintenance.

In the USFS Pacific Southwest Region, which includes eighteen national forests spanning 20 million acres of land in California, a recent Regional review identified over 90 deferred maintenance projects with critical safety components for administrative facilities, fire facilities, and employee housing, including five priority projects on each National Forest in the state. Completion of these projects would reduce maintenance costs, improve visitor experiences, support employee recruitment and retention, and allow for additional modifications needed to protect employees, particularly in light of COVID-19. Notably, funding these projects would also create hundreds of jobs across the state.

It is important to note that the current backlog of projects in the USFS Pacific Southwest Region is particularly concerning as the state of California progresses deeper into its 2020 wildfire season, with fire officials predicting higher-than-normal fire potential through the fall. As the Region works to swiftly implement new wildfire suppression tactics to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread at base camps, it is all the more important that USFS employees have access to working infrastructure.

To keep these federal employees and the rural communities they serve safe, we urge you to provide funding for the design and construction of new fire cache facilities and updated airtanker bases throughout the state. By replacing the debilitated and aging Northern and Southern Operations Geographic Area Caches, the USFS Pacific Southwest Region would be able to significantly reduce leasing costs and increase wildfire preparedness. Similarly, by updating the infrastructure at airtanker bases, the USFS would be able to generate jobs, more rapidly deploy large airtankers to the fire line, and enhance initial attack effectiveness to protect communities and firefighters.

In addition to prioritizing the aforementioned physical infrastructure projects, we urge you to include funding for technology updates needed to provide real-time tracking and response of firefighting resources, particularly during rapidly escalating wildfires. With upgraded information technology, firefighting teams will not only be able to virtually access weather and other incidental information but also share information in real time with other firefighting teams. This type of collaboration will significantly enhance the common operating picture for all levels of a firefighting organization.

For decades, the USFS has struggled with insufficient funds to address critical infrastructure needs, and every year, the backlog of projects becomes increasingly overwhelming. As the COVID-19 pandemic puts new and unknown pressures on our National Forest System, we cannot wait any longer to prioritize these projects.

Over the coming weeks, as you work to make critical funding decisions to address the current unemployment crisis, we ask that you strongly consider the high potential for USFS projects in the Pacific Southwest Region to create thousands of sustainable jobs, particularly during a time of heightened need for effective USFS services. As the Pacific Southwest Region has already completed a comprehensive review of projects, we encourage Congressional investments directly to the Region so these projects can move forward in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress

## ADDITIONAL SIGNATORIES

Grace F. Napolitano  
Member of Congress

Mike Thompson  
Member of Congress

Jim Costa  
Member of Congress

Harley Rouda  
Member of Congress

Mark Takano  
Member of Congress

Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress

Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress

Jerry McNerney  
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Alan Lowenthal  
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Ami Bera, M.D.  
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John Garamendi  
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Judy Chu  
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Zoe Lofgren  
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Doris Matsui  
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Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress