



United States Senate

June 2, 2021

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing to you with great concern about our federal firefighting workforce as California is bracing for yet another dangerous wildfire season and more than 70 percent of the Western United States is experiencing severe drought. So far this year, California has experienced 2,878 wildfires that have burned 16,800 acres, more than five times as much acreage as had burned at this point last year. To effectively deal with this threat now and in the future, it is critical for the federal government to address long-term issues with our firefighting workforce, especially the inequities in pay between federal and state wildland firefighters.

The Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service has informed me that hiring and retention of firefighters is becoming increasingly difficult due to the high cost of living, increasing minimum wage, and the significant discrepancy in salary compared to other wildland firefighting organizations in California. For example, the starting salary for Forest Service firefighters in the Bay Area—which has a high cost-of-living—is \$33,912, compared to a \$58,668 starting salary for Cal Fire firefighters. This discrepancy has resulted in an inability to recruit and retain federal firefighters, which is especially problematic for California where the federal government owns 58 percent of the State's forest land. In 2020, Cal Fire employed a peak of nearly 8,000 firefighters and expects to exceed that level in 2021. In contrast, the Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service consistently has trouble retaining 5,000 firefighters on staff.

Please know that I am committed to working with you to reach a solution, and I consider it one of my highest priorities to ensure that California has the firefighters it needs to respond as quickly and effectively as possible to wildfire. Bridging the salary gap will help the federal government recruit and retain the staff necessary to fulfill its responsibilities on the land it owns, and provide aid to others when needed. I am grateful for your attention to this critical matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dianne Feinstein".

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

DF/rw