



June 13, 2025

Hon. Doug Burgum
Secretary of Interior
Department of the Interior
1849 C St., NW, MS-4106
Washington, DC 20240

Hon. Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave.
Washington, DC 20250

Subj: Forest Bridges Provides Key Principles for the Development of the Proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Service

Dear Secretary Burgum and Secretary Rollins,

On behalf of the Board of Directors for Forest Bridges: The O&C Forest Habitat Project (<https://www.forestbridges.org>), I respectfully offer several key considerations in response to the proposed unified U.S. Wildland Fire Service to support its success. I do so especially from our perspective developing and advancing policies for effectively managing wildfire and mitigating wildfire risk on the 2.9 million acres of federally owned (public) Oregon and California Railroad Revested Lands (O&C Lands).

As we believe you are aware, the O&C lands lie in a checkerboard of ownership together with private, state, local and other federal lands, including those in Tribal trust, in 18 counties of western Oregon. Since 2015, Forest Bridges, a Roseburg, OR grassroots 501(c)(3) policy collaborative, has been building trust among collaborators that represent diverse perspectives on O&C forest management – e.g., conservation, recreation, Tribes, timber, government and the public. Together we've been evolving a set of principles and strategies, grounded in consensus Western Science and Indigenous Knowledge, to shift the current unsustainable management model on the O&C Lands to a 21st Century all-lands, Active Conservation Management model. We include in our definition of the O&C Lands around 2.1 million acres of BLM O&C lands, 75,000 acres of BLM Coos Bay Wagon Road Lands, 239,000 acres of the BLM public domain lands in western Oregon and 492,399 acres of controverted O&C lands managed by the Forest Service (Forest Service O&C Lands).

Consolidating wildland fire programs across the Departments of Interior and Agriculture into a unified U.S. Wildland Fire Service housed within DOI presents a structural reform of a magnitude that comes with real risks and significant opportunities. Success will require the entire land management and wildfire community to engage Congress and ensure reforms strengthen responsible land management alongside – and not siloed or separate from -- suppression. We firmly believe that addressing the current increased wildfire threat should not be seen as preparing for war but rather keeping the focus and funding on proactive forest management strategies with firefighting as a backup strategy.

We believe the following “design principles” can help guide the development of the proposed new U.S. Wildland Fire Service:

Support Collaboration

Incorporate States, Tribes, local government, the private sector, and local partners. The current fire organization in our nation is the result of decades of development that has involved coordinated efforts by federal land agencies, state forestry agencies, Tribes, and private partners. In a large fire prone portion of the O&C checkerboard, coordinated fire detection and suppression has also included two fire protective associations – the Douglas Forest Protective Association (DFPA - founded in 1912) and the Coos Forest Protective Association (CFPA - founded in 1919). Combined these two nonprofit member associations provide fire detection and suppression services on 3.1 million acres of BLM O&C, Bureau of Indian Affairs, private and state lands in Douglas, Coos, and Curry Counties. These two associations’ Federal, state, private and county partners contribute financial, human and equipment resources, and unparalleled local knowledge annually, to support DFPA and CFPA’s operations on more than 100 fires annually. This coordination is critical in keeping wildfire acreage to a minimum, by focusing on the initial attack phase of firefighting, which focuses on putting the fire out before it can expand. While expensive per acre, this is money well spent to minimize total firefighting costs. The initial attack phase of firefighting in our region has essentially been a local response, where time is of the essence, with outside federal resources coming to bear only when wildfires exceed local resources.

The process of designing and a new system should be informed by the full suite of entities involved in the existing wildfire system and should include measures to increase participation of non-federal entities. The existing system is an asset that should be highly valued and supported into the future.

We believe the following “design principles” can help guide the development of the proposed new U.S. Wildland Fire Service:

Shift from Reactive to Proactive

Think holistically about wildfire suppression, preparedness, mitigation, and recovery. Forest Bridges believes that it is only through proactive fire risk reduction on federal forests that we can hope to draw down the long term costs of wildfire. Though not all components of the proposed new system must address all of these phases, a new system should better integrate resources across these phases. The entities that should be engaged in any change process include those involved in the preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery phases of fire at the local, state, and federal levels.

Enable Prescribed Fire and Cultural Burning

Ensure prescribed fire and cultural burning (beneficial fire treatments) are available and allowed. Application of prescribed fire and cultural burning as tools along with other fuel treatments (e.g., thinning), can be cost-effective means of reducing long term wildfire risk. Furthermore, burning is critical to maintain the efficacy of thinning and other fuel reduction treatments over time to build lasting fire resilience. Beneficial fire tools should be available regardless of whether or not land management and wildfire

suppression are housed within the same agency. We promote Tribal co-management arrangements, where Tribes can lead the way in expanding the use of beneficial fire as a tool. On the BLM O&C Lands, we do not promote the use of managed fire (A.K.A., “managed suppression”) due to the high risk of escape onto other land ownerships. And on Forest Service O&C Lands, managed suppression should only occur when weather and moisture conditions permit – i.e., never during the official wildfire season.


Invest in Resilience

Provide sufficient investments to reduce long term costs. For too long funding for wildfire work has lagged behind the real risk on the landscape and to communities. More than 100 years of fire suppression, removal of Indigenous stewardship, and past and current land management have contributed to the current wildfire crisis and overstocked federal forests in dire need of active management. For far too long federal resources have been borrowed from wildfire mitigation funds to help support the growing cost of wildfire response – a cycle that has led to the inadequacy of much-needed active management to reduce hazardous fuel loads. On O&C forests and nearby national forests we are watching old growth forest habitats in protective reserves disappear at an alarming rate and thousands upon thousands of forest acres reburned and often converted to other landscape types. Urgent action is needed to reverse these trends.

By right-sizing investments in risk reduction, response, and proactive recovery, we can draw down the long term costs of wildfire. Some studies show a 6-to-1 or higher return on investment for mitigation. Just as creative thinking is needed to redesign the systems we use to approach wildfire, we must also allow for new thinking when determining the appropriate level of investment.

We thank you for taking the time to review and consider our proposed ideas as you develop, in partnership with non-federal partners, the proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Agency.

Sincerely yours,

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cc: The Oregon Congressional Delegation, Congressional Appropriations and Authorization Committee Leadership