

Mr. Robert Bonnie  
Transition Team Leader, USDA  
President-elect Biden Administration

December 1, 2020

Dear Mr. Bonnie,

The attached overview document, “The West's Wildfire Crisis and the Urgency to Restore Safer, More Resilient Conditions in Its Dry Forest Types” attempts to address what is arguably the most significant natural resource and public safety issue in the western United States. It describes the problem, outlines the causal and contributory factors involved, arrays alternatives, and identifies some of the barriers to safer, more cost-effective and more sustainable solutions. Lastly, it offers some recommendations.

Our present wildfire protection strategies are not working at the highest levels of threat, where most costs, losses, and damages are concentrated. In fact, in the past twenty years, there has been a steady increase in the number of destructive, uncontrollable wildfires in the West. Conservatively, wildfire-related private property losses, natural resource damages, smoke effects, and other impacts are estimated to exceed \$100 billion, despite growing preparedness funding and suppression spending in this period. Fatalities have reached levels not seen since the nation began formally organizing for wildfire protection in 1905. Deepening droughts, extreme weather events, deteriorated forest conditions, and unconstrained population growth pushing into the wildlands are all implicated.

Restoring resilience in fire-prone forests has proven an effective protection measure in places here and abroad. It may also be the nation's best hedge against alarming climate change projections and an important counter-balance to greenhouse gas emissions. It complements USDA's Climate Change 21 Initiative. However, in the West, particularly, the rate of restoration work is far eclipsed by the rate of wildfire losses...and the gap is widening.

Fundamentally, the wildfire crisis largely traces to the way we have tended and used the region's fire-prone ecosystems. It is important to note that many of our land management strategies were enacted long before the onset of climate change and before we knew much about the disturbance ecologies that define these fire-prone landscapes. Our management of these lands has not adapted to the changed circumstance of climate change, nor has it aligned with the fire ecologies involved. Perhaps perversely, many of our land management and land use strategies, reflected in regulatory controls, fiscal policies, market forces, and other factors, may actually be abetting the crisis.

Although we believe that all efforts should be made – now – to accelerate restoration work in high-priority areas, we believe that a science-grounded, evidence-based commission, having the benefit of strong field support and the best available research is needed to help identify obstacles and chart a course forward. In the “Recommendations” section of this overview, we list a series of tasks that, at a minimum, this commission should undertake.

Thank you for your kind attention to this important issue. We are happy to follow-up or discuss this further with you or your team. We wish this administration every success in the coming years.

Sincerely,  
/S/ Dale N. Bosworth  
/S/ Jerry T. Williams