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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150

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May 8, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20472

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretaries and Administrator Gaynor:

I write to respectfully request that you coordinate efforts to allocate personal protective equipment (PPE) and rapid COVID-19 tests for federal wildland fire crews. Additionally, I request that you work with state governments to ensure that state, local, and volunteer fire crews that are likely to be assigned to federal wildland fire incidents have equivalent support.

I appreciate the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior's (DOI) efforts to develop health and safety guidance for wildland fire operations at the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Additionally, I welcome efforts by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to open the national supply chain of personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 tests to states and first responders.

Minimizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fire crews is necessary to ensure our nation has a reliable and cohesive response to wildfires during what experts predict will be a busy summer season, especially in regions like Southcentral Alaska, Northern California, the Southwest, and Pacific Northwest. Wildfires, like viruses, respect no boundaries. As we seek to contain COVID-19, there will be hundreds of instances where thousands of federal and non-federal firefighters are dispatched across state borders to battle blazes in rural locations.

Across the West and on a moment's notice, firefighters will be transported by vehicle and airplane across state lines, as assigned by the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC). Last year, more than 30,000 firefighters from the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management,

and their non-federal fire agency cooperators responded to wildfires often outside their home states. Fire crews often work in teams of 20 individuals and share eating and bedding space in camps of hundreds. They will spend weeks working in difficult terrain while breathing air degraded by wildfire smoke. Last year, my home state of Alaska had the largest active fire in the nation, the Swan Lake Fire, which burned for several months and had 127 crews totaling 2,540 federal, state, and tribal firefighters working to contain the blaze. Nationally, there were 50,477 fires that consumed over 7,287 square miles of land.

Given the intergovernmental nature of federal wildland fire response, the federal government has a unique responsibility to ensure a sufficient supply chain of PPE and rapid testing for all wildfire crews, in coordination with their state counterparts. Accordingly, I ask that FEMA, HHS, USDA, and DOI make it their shared mission to prevent outbreaks of COVID-19 on the front lines and to provide me with a status update on actions being taken to ensure rapid tests are made available to state and federal fire crews as the 2020 fire season ramps up.

I also request that you provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the current PPE need for the wildland fire services at DOI and USDA Forest Service?
2. I understand that FEMA has transferred some PPE equipment to other federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, through the COVID-19 National Response Coordinating Center (NRCC). Will the NRCC provide PPE assistance to federal wildland fire crews?
3. What can be done to provide wildland fire crews and support staff with the most accurate COVID-19 tests? Can tests be administered before deployment, during assignment, and after demobilization?

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator