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Memorandum

To: Chief, U.S. Forest Service  
Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs  
Director, Bureau of Land Management  
Director, National Park Service  
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

From: Deb Haaland   
Secretary of the Interior

Thomas J. Vilsack   
Secretary of Agriculture

Subject: 2023 Direction to Wildland Fire Leadership

We deeply appreciate your dedicated leadership in confronting the wildfire crisis in our Nation. You have seen first-hand the devastation and long-term impacts caused by more frequent, extreme wildfires that now affect the country each year. Once again, your wildland fire personnel are preparing for—or already contending with—wildfires driven by a combination of climate change, extreme heat, drought, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface.

Last year, nearly 69,000 wildfires burned more than 7.5 million acres across the United States, with many acres burning at high severity. Like many recent fire years, the reported number of wildfires nationwide was higher than the 10-year average, up by more than 10,000 fires from 2021. These fires have overwhelming impacts on the American people—many were displaced, homes were destroyed, and lives were lost.

As we enter the second year of historic investments from President Biden’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the first year of the Inflation Reduction Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior (Departments) are expanding efforts to reduce wildfire risk. To do so, we are working collaboratively to invest in the wildland fire workforce, increase hazardous fuels treatments and post-wildfire restoration, and fund more wildland fire science. Both Departments have made substantial progress toward completing fuel treatments on 5.8 million acres.

Wildland firefighters are the backbone of our wildfire response. They save lives, protect communities, and serve on the frontlines to confront our Nation’s wildfire crisis. We must take better care of them by addressing the challenges that have plagued them for decades. Better care means better pay and benefits, better housing, better mental and physical health resources, and better work-life balance.

The [President's 2024 budget request](#) and accompanying legislative proposals will enable the Departments to make historic changes to our wildland fire workforce. The cornerstone of these long-term reforms is a permanent base pay increase and a separate pay table for Federal wildland firefighters. It builds on the President's 2021 commitment that wildland firefighters will earn at least \$15 an hour and retain the BIL's pay supplements.

The budget request also includes a proposal for incident standby premium pay for all Federal responders that provides some compensation for all hours for which responders are mobilized to an incident, as well as funding for facilities improvements and maintenance to help employees confronted with inadequate or unaffordable housing options. Additional investments will allow us to increase the pay for Tribal wildland firefighters and increase the number of permanent Federal and Tribal wildland fire personnel. Adding this capacity also will give existing firefighters more time for rest, recuperation, training, and professional development.

We know our wildland firefighters are doing all they can to keep people, communities, and resources safe, and we are committed to doing all we can to emphasize to Congress the critical importance of ensuring that wildland firefighters have the pay and working conditions they deserve. We will need your help to continue to provide the information necessary for Congress to make the right decision to make permanent the pay increases of the past year and improve working conditions, notwithstanding funding caps in the recent budget agreement.

At the same time, we will continue to engage with Tribes, partners, and others on implementing the Forest Service's [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#) and the Department of the Interior's [Five-Year Wildfire Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan](#) so that this work does not fall squarely on the backs of our existing workforce.

Both Departments will continue to focus on implementing the new wildland firefighter occupational series this year. We also will continue to develop a [Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program](#) to address mental health needs. The program's intent is to provide increased access to services that support mental preparedness, recognize the importance of self-care, and address the effects of cumulative stress.

This year we are continuing to transition to [Complex Incident Management](#). The current Incident Management Team model was created more than 40 years ago to meet the demands of a wildfire environment much different than the one we live in today. This shift will provide a more adaptable process to meet the demands of large, complex incidents with the ability to expand or reduce staffing based on needs.

Guided by the [National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy](#) (Cohesive Strategy), both Departments will continue to work with our interagency partners to restore and maintain resilient landscapes; help communities become fire adapted; and ensure a safe, effective, risk-based wildfire response. We know that no single entity can solve the Nation's wildfire crisis alone. The recently updated Cohesive Strategy reinforces the need for collaboration to meet today's wildland fire management challenges, including climate change; workforce capacity, health, and well-being; community resilience; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental justice. As a stark reminder of the inherent hazards in confronting wildfires, this year we commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Yarnell Hill Fire, in which 19 wildland firefighters were killed in the

line of duty. This tragic event remains heavy in the hearts and minds of the wildland fire community and remains a constant reminder that we must stay committed to safety, a culture of learning, and our risk mitigation efforts.

This is an unprecedented moment, not only in terms of the growing wildfire crisis, but also in the opportunities presented by our long-term strategies, increased investments, and improved workforce support. Your leadership is essential to maximize the impact of these historic investments, and to inspire the next generation to join us in tackling the challenges of wildland fire management.

Thank you for your service to our country and its people.