

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 22, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
Vice President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Vice President Harris:

As Members representing states with record-setting wildfire seasons, we write in support of your decision to elevate the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) to a Cabinet-level agency and your call for OSTP Director nominee Eric Lander to make recommendations to your administration “on the general strategies, specific actions, and new structures that the federal government should adopt to ensure that our nation can continue to harness the full power of science and technology on behalf of the American people.”¹ We ask that you demonstrate this renewed commitment to science by harnessing the full potential of the American scientific community to better prevent and respond to increasingly destructive wildfires.

The Fourth National Climate Assessment Vol. 1 found that warmer temperatures and dry conditions contribute to the increasing severity and frequency of wildfires.² Over 58,250 wildfires burned 10.3 million acres in 2020, the most acreage impacted in a year. More than half of the acres impacted were on federally managed lands.³ Direct damages of the 2020 wildfires alone are about \$20 billion, which does not account for indirect costs such as the adverse health impacts tied to unhealthy particulate pollution from smoke or annual suppression costs at the federal and state levels.⁴ The mounting financial impact of wildfires make the case for the federal government to go big on wildfire funding and provide both immediate and longer term policy fixes.

In recent years Congress and western states have been working to adapt to the reality of increasingly large wildfires and nearly year-long fire seasons, but the federal government’s focus on suppression and forest management, while crucial, is insufficient without science-based mitigation strategies. We urge you to include in your FY22 budget request at least \$200 million in annual funding for wildfire science to be distributed between federal agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Agency, National Science Foundation, National Institute of Science and Technology, and United States Geological Survey. Significant investment in research and

¹ Biden, Joseph R., “A Letter to Dr. Eric S. Lander, the President’s Science Advisor and nominee as Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy,” White House Statements and Releases, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/20/a-letter-to-dr-eric-s-lander-the-presidents-science-advisor-and-nominee-as-director-of-the-office-of-science-and-technology-policy/>.

² Wuebbles, D.J., et al., “Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I,” U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC USA, doi: [10.7930/J08S4N35](https://doi.org/10.7930/J08S4N35).

³ Katie Hoover and Laura A. Hanson, “Wildfire Statistics,” Congressional Research Service, January 4, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/IF10244.pdf>.

⁴ Jill Cowan, “How Much Will the Wildfires Cost?” New York Times, September 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/us/california-fires-cost.html>.

development will greatly improve our ability to predict, plan, and rebuild from wildfires through the procurement of new scientific tools to enhance detection systems, development of new technologies, advancement of modeling capabilities, and improvement of understanding in fire behavior and the changing climate. We have seen promising evidence that improved forecasting will allow for increased warning times for evacuating communities and safer and more effective firefighting operations, improved fire risk models will reduce the frequency and limit the scope of public safety power shutoff events, and improved building and zoning standards in the wildland urban interface will mitigate property damage by wildfires. There is also an urgent need to study the health effects of chronic exposure to wildfires, particularly among our wildland firefighters, and to develop robust respiratory protections for our first responders. Marshalling the expertise of U.S. science agencies will allow us to more efficiently and effectively respond to wildfires as well as put vital tools in the hands of our firefighters on the ground.


We also ask that you establish a coordinating body that can act as a single focal point of responsibility for policy leadership and accountability to ensure a comprehensive strategy for combatting wildfires. Although many agencies have pursued wildfire-related initiatives of their own accord, the efforts will not meet the needs without direct mandates and dedicated funding.

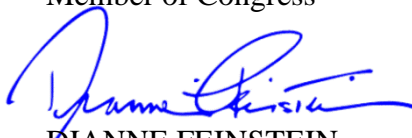
While several federal coordinating bodies already exist, they remain largely focused on land management and suppression operations and fail to incorporate research and development. The Wildland Fire Management Policy Committee created by the previous administration's Executive Order 13976, though well intentioned, is another example of a duplicative and poorly thought out coordinating body. The omission of federal science agencies is a serious oversight of the important role they play in prediction and understanding of wildfires and the potential for their work to provide more immediate relief in mitigating future devastation and building resilience.

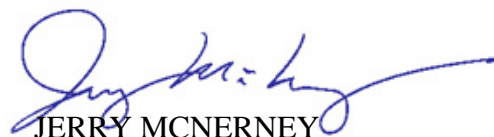
It is time for the federal government to start treating wildfires more like other major disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods by making sustained investments beyond traditional disaster relief efforts. We urge you to take an all-of-the-above approach and to move aggressively and quickly on the threat of wildfires. We are eager and ready to help.


Sincerely,



ZOE LOFGREN
Member of Congress


ED PERLMUTTER
Member of Congress


DIANNE FEINSTEIN
United States Senator


JERRY MCNERNEY
Member of Congress


SUZANNE BONAMICI
Member of Congress


ALEX PADILLA
United States Senator

Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress

Bill Foster
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Grace F. Napolitano
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Ami Bera, M.D.
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Joe Neguse
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Earl Blumenauer
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Jimmy Gomez
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Jimmy Panetta
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