

# United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

June 5, 2023

The Honorable Gary Peters  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security  
and Government Affairs  
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rand Paul  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security  
and Government Affairs  
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Peters and Ranking Member Paul:

We urge the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs' swift consideration of legislation that authorizes a long-term solution to increase wildland firefighter recruitment and retention. Bipartisan, bicameral efforts during the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress – including the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117–58)* – provided temporary relief to the federal wildland firefighter workforce through a short-term pay increase of \$20,000 or 50 percent of their base salary (whichever is less). This relief will expire on September 30, 2023 for the over 16,000 USDA and DOI firefighters who received temporary raises. As the 2023 fire season begins, Congress must support our nation's federal wildland firefighters and ensure the federal government has a robust and resilient workforce.

Investing in our federal wildland firefighters is a matter of national security as critical infrastructure, homes, communities, structures, and natural resources are at grave and growing risk of catastrophic wildfire. These investments are critical for increased capacity, housing, mental health and well-being. Without increased capacity, work-life balance is a challenge. Across the West, extreme weather fuels frequent, large, and severe wildfires. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the total acres burned by wildfire has doubled in the last 20 years, with over 7.5 million acres burned in 2022 alone. Between 2017 and 2021, wildfires destroyed over 12,000 homes, businesses, and other structures on average annually, more than triple the preceding five-year period. These fires are exceptionally expensive, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimating wildfires costs during the past five years reaching nearly \$67 billion. Climate data shows that wildfire season has increased by 80 days since the 1970s and climate projections show the wildfire season will continue to grow longer.

Wildland firefighters are on the front lines of these crises, protecting homes and communities, and helping reduce megafires' severity and scope. Despite their critical importance, federal wildland firefighters are stretched to their breaking point. They are working increasingly long fire seasons under extreme conditions. A recent Government Accountability Office report found that low pay, poor work-life balance, and mental health challenges, among other factors, limit federal wildland firefighter recruitment and retention.

Firefighters deserve fair pay, support for their mental and physical health, and time to recover from their dangerous work. In a future with increasingly catastrophic wildfires, Congress cannot wait to ensure that the federal government has the necessary workforce to protect communities.

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We are grateful for the bravery of our wildland firefighters. We look forward to working with you to advance permanent solutions to ensure they get the pay and benefits they deserve.

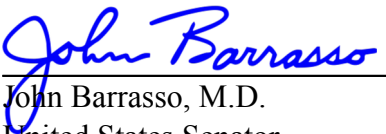
Sincerely,



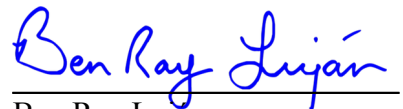
Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



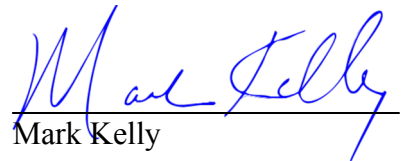
John Barrasso, M.D.  
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator



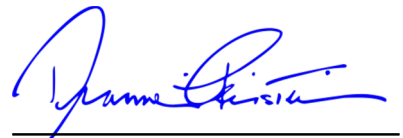
John Hickenlooper  
United States Senator



Mark Kelly  
United States Senator



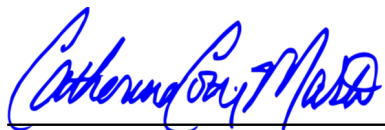
Jacky Rosen  
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator

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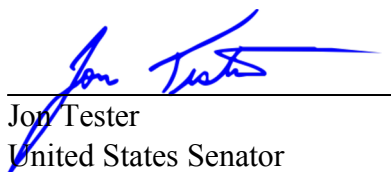
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Catherine Cortez Masto  
United States Senator



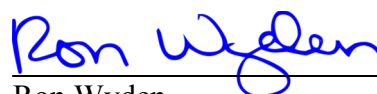
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Martin Heinrich  
United States Senator



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Jon Tester  
United States Senator



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Ron Wyden  
United States Senator