

## United States Senate

October 2, 2017

The Honorable Tony Tooke, Chief  
United States Forest Service  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Tooke:

I am writing today to congratulate you on your new post as Chief of the Forest Service and ensure you are aware of Montanans' priorities. The Forest Service plays a critical role in Montana because our economy and heritage are directly tied to our public lands. I look forward to working with you to responsibly manage our forests and ensure all Montanans have access to these special places for generations to come.

Wildfires continue to ravage communities throughout Montana where we have seen more than 1.2 million acres burn this year. That is more than three times the ten-year average. Montanans have been evacuated and lost homes and livestock.

Two brave men lost their lives fighting wildfires in Montana this year.

This is a natural disaster on a significant scale, and the losses are both personal and economic. Our two largest economic drivers, agriculture and the outdoor recreation, rely on access to public land. A recent report noted that Montana's outdoor recreation industry supports a \$7.1 billion annual economy. However, because of evacuations and land closures, inns, restaurants, and guides are seeing a rapid drop in spending from out-of-state visitors. To help contain the fires in Montana and keep people on the ground safe, the Forest Service, in cooperation with the Department of Interior, must continue to bring all available resources to bear on these ongoing natural disasters.

The Forest Service must also limit the damage after fires, and to prepare for next fire season. To this end, the Forest Service should immediately begin plans for post-fire salvage operations, and it must stand ready to perform the necessary road maintenance and erosion control to keep fire-scorched slopes from affecting our infrastructure. The agency must also work hand-in-hand with Congress to eliminate the need for fire-borrowing at the Forest Service and treat wildfires as we do other natural disasters. Climate change will continue to drive longer, more intense wildfire seasons, and we need to make sure we're ready to do the forest management and mitigation work to keep our forests healthy and people safe.

In addition to its critical wildfire responsibilities, the Forest Service is also responsible for managing some of our nation's best recreational lands. From the Rocky Mountain Front to the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness where East Rosebud Creek flows, these lands are critical drivers for our outdoor recreation economy. It is critically important that the Forest Service

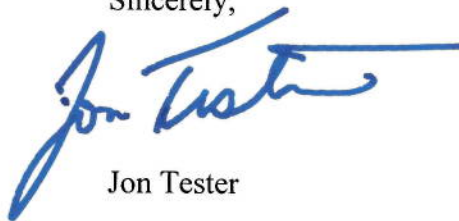
continue to work with local communities and landowners to provide public access to our public lands. We need to protect access to these unique places for future generations.

Our public lands support not only a thriving recreation industry but also a long legacy of responsible timber management. As a career forester, you know the importance of collaborating with local communities to get good projects off the ground, and the need for science-based forest management. The Forest Service must also take a hard look at how to improve timber harvest, and end the practice of counting firewood towards its annual timber goals. We need to support jobs in the woods and in the mills, and the agency must monitor what timber harvest is useful for supporting a vibrant timber economy, rather than just total wood leaving the forest. That economy also benefits from the development of next-generation technologies, including biomass energy, biochar, tall wood buildings, cross-laminated timber, and other innovative uses for wood products and wood waste.

While the timber industry and outdoor recreation can help provide economic support for forested counties, budgets are stretched too thin by the expiration of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. Without reauthorization of SRS, counties will struggle to balance their budgets, and provide basic services like road maintenance, garbage collection, and a quality public education. Coming from rural Montana, I have seen schools shrink as they are forced to shutter music and arts programs and cut the size of sports teams in half. These changes underscore the urgency of SRS reauthorization. While Congress must pass legislation, the continued support of the agency makes this message reach further, and will be remembered by the rural counties that are the Forest Service's best partners.

Montana has a long history of working with the Forest Service to responsibly manage our public lands and support a strong rural economy. I stand ready to help you continue that tradition, and look forward to making these priorities a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester