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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: 2022 Direction to Wildland Fire Leadership

We are grateful for your leadership through 2 years of catastrophic fire seasons which devastated communities and destroyed resources in their wake. No one knows better than you the extreme challenges and suppression costs that come with these bigger and more destructive wildfires. Unfortunately, once again, your wildland fire managers are preparing for, or already contending with, fires driven by the devastating combination of climate change, extreme heat, drought, unabated development in the wildland urban interface, and a workforce feeling the weight of recent years.

Any of these conditions would test wildland fire leadership and systems in what we used to call a normal year. Now we are on the brink of conditions where wildfires overwhelm response capabilities. From the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, the country is suffering from some degree of drought. We already see considerable wildfire activity in the Southeast. Vast areas of the West and across the country are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread 10 to 30 miles or more, burning through communities and multiple land ownerships and types.

Last year, nearly 59,000 wildfires burned more than 7.1 million acres of land across the United States. The 2021 fire year was notable because the country was at heightened preparedness levels for a record 99 consecutive days, stressing personnel and resources, and demonstrating the year-round nature of wildland fire. According to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Risk Management Committee, the wildland fire community lost 21 fire personnel in 2021, including 4 members of the U.S. Forest Service family. Remembering those whose lives were lost implore us to ensure that firefighter and public safety will always be our highest priority. Protecting communities and infrastructure is important, but it is not worth the loss of a single life.

We also have a historic investment in wildland fire management through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) that significantly expands our wildfire mitigation, response, and recovery efforts this year. The law provides approximately \$4.5 billion over the next 5 years for both the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to expand our efforts and reduce wildfire risk; restore ecosystems; prepare for, and respond to, harmful wildfires; and support post-fire recovery, including in underserved communities traditionally overlooked. All your efforts are needed to ensure our BIL investments make a positive impact and are meaningful to the public.

The USDA and DOI continues a strong partnership guided by the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy), prepared jointly with Tribal, State, local, and non-governmental partners. This strategy stood the test of time and articulates our shared goals of (1) restoring fire-adapted ecosystems on a landscape scale; (2) building fire-adapted human communities; and (3) responding effectively to wildland fire. Guided by President Biden’s direction in Executive Order 14008, entitled “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” we work every day to make our Nation more resilient in the face of ever-worsening wildfires, droughts, floods, extreme heat, and other risks to livelihoods exacerbated by climate change.

With the release of DOI’s 5-year plan coupled with the U.S. Forest Service’s 10-year wildfire crisis strategy, we build on the vision and goals of the Cohesive Strategy, adding cutting edge science, and outline our shared commitment to responsibly and expeditiously implement the historic investments provided in the BIL. Taken together, these plans illustrate the targeted high-risk areas as a priority for wildfire mitigation attention; our commitment to supporting our wildland firefighters through science, technology, training, and workforce reforms; and our intent to support communities recovering after fires through ecosystem restoration work to set landscapes on a path towards natural recovery and climate resilience.

The BIL invests in our workforce by creating a new occupational series for wildland firefighters and programs focusing on mental health, resilience, and well-being, all sorely needed in this era of growing fire severity and extreme wildfire behavior. It is important to note, even before the passage of the BIL, the Biden-Harris administration took action to improve conditions for wildland firefighters by ensuring firefighters make no less than \$15 per hour and increasing the number of firefighters hired as full-time employees. A year-round, permanent workforce is key to addressing the increased risk of wildfire from the buildup of fuels resulting in devastating wildfires and helping to ensure wildland firefighters have a work-life balance. Between DOI and USDA we are now 16,700 firefighters strong. We are fortunate to have strong relationships with Tribal Nations, States, local communities, the National Guard, and the Department of Defense bringing together more firefighters when our country needs them most.

This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the interagency Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (Center). After the 1994 fire season that saw 34 firefighters killed in the line of duty, fire leaders acknowledged learning is vital to thriving in high-risk environments. The Center was established in 2002 to be the nucleus of organizational learning and has become an integral part of the interagency fire program. The Center helps us recognize that risk cannot always be eliminated and learning reviews, lesson sharing, and the study of unintended outcomes without the fear of punitive action is vital in every organization.

The commitment to honor past experiences through learning applies to the importance of creating a work environment that protects mental as well as physical health and prioritizes the most important asset in wildland fire—the people. This means reaffirming our commitments to safe, inclusive, and harassment free workplaces. Both DOI and USDA are making progress in establishing a National Firefighter Health and Wellness Program and creating a work environment where every employee feels safe, valued, and respected. It is more important than ever we work together to respond to the crisis in front of us and take care of our firefighters and our communities.

Always remember: Your leadership sets the example for the next generation of wildland firefighters and public land managers. We look forward to supporting you and your wildland fire leadership as we embark on a new path for wildland fire management. Thank you for your service to our country and its people.