



MAY 13 2021

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: 2021 Direction to Wildland Fire Leadership

As we approach the height of the fire season, we want to take the opportunity to reflect on the unprecedented challenges the wildland fire community successfully met over the past year and acknowledge the significant challenges our agencies expect to face this year, especially in light of historic drought conditions across the West.

Last year, COVID-19 presented a formidable set of challenges to the interagency wildland fire community that required us to rethink and adjust—sometimes on the fly—many facets of our operational routines. We overcame a significant number of COVID-19 obstacles, thanks to the professionalism and adaptability of our firefighters and the foresight of our fire leadership. This was achieved in a year that saw historic fire activity. As the Nation continues to get a handle on COVID-19, we need to remain vigilant in our efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus on the fireline and beyond.

When extreme fire conditions materialized, the preparedness level sat at four or five for 71 straight days—leaving crews and resources spread thin for months. The wildland fire community suffered the heartbreaking losses of firefighters, pilots, and equipment operators: 12 lives were lost. One loss of life is too many. We must remain steadfast to our commitment to preparedness and safety in everything we do.

Across the United States, more than 10.3 million acres burned—a record year and more than 50 percent above the 10-year average for acres burned. From August through October 2020, the most extreme conditions caused thousands of evacuations, the loss of homes and structures, and

the tragic fatalities of 11 people in Oregon and 34 people in California. These conditions prompted the National Multiagency Coordinating Group to request support from our North American partners in Mexico and Canada during peak fire activity. Above-normal fire activity is expected again in 2021 for many geographic regions of the United States.

While working through unprecedented conditions, the wildland fire community put into practice mitigation measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 before, during, and following fire operations. Practices that prevented widespread outbreaks at wildfire incidents included the following: (1) remote work and increased reliance on technology for many general command positions; (2) more spike camps; (3) screening and sanitation protocols; and (4) treating individual fire modules as single-family pods. Our medical professionals from the U.S. Department of the Interior (Interior) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service continue to work with their counterparts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to build on the lessons learned from last year.

This spring, we have seen firefighting personnel from across Interior, USDA's Forest Service, and other partners mobilizing in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help deliver on President Biden's goal of establishing 100 Federally-supported COVID-19 vaccination sites and administering 200 million vaccine doses in 100 days. Thank you for your contributions to this effort and commitment to achieving the Nation's vaccination goals. We are fast approaching the busiest time of the fire year where our personnel and resources will be responding to wildfires across the Nation. Until then, we encourage the wildland fire management community to continue to leverage its skills, expertise, and agility to make our Nation's vaccination effort a success.

Getting the COVID-19 vaccine is voluntary. Yet, vaccines are one of the most effective tools available to protect health and prevent disease, and it is important for wildland fire personnel to be vaccinated to maintain critical fire operations. If you have not already done so, please sign up to be vaccinated and encourage your wildland fire staff to do so, as well. We encourage you to share information with your teams on the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine options and, if you have questions or need guidance, to seek out the COVID-19 specialists within Interior and USDA working across the interagency to help end the pandemic.

Wildfire response is inherently complex and challenging. Climate change has brought about longer fire seasons—fires burning more land on average each year, more extreme fire behavior, and the increased frequency of fires in the wildland urban interface that impact more homes and communities. We note that more than 90 percent of the West is currently experiencing drought, with the majority of areas being subject to significantly below-average precipitation and extended dry periods that dramatically affect soil moisture and spring and summer runoff. These conditions have not only increased the likelihood of wildfires, but they have also strained water supplies and increased tensions in communities.

In this increasingly complex fire environment, our focus remains on the immediate safety and long-term wellbeing of our wildland firefighters and incident responders. We strive to provide an inclusive work environment where employees have access to all of the tools they need to be safe, as well as the training to make informed risk management decisions in the fire environment.

Employee wellbeing is important, and we seek to support the current and future health of our employees. Physical and mental safety are priorities in making the wildland fire community a place where all can contribute to the goals of effective wildland fire mitigation and response.

Our Nation's wildland fire management framework is built on collaboration that includes a broad spectrum of different perspectives and skills to solve the evolving challenges we face. Our wide-ranging agreements with Tribes, States, counties, and other organizations underscore the need for, and importance of, collaboration across the board. These collaborations extend beyond suppression operations to fire science, data sourcing, and management, as well as cross-jurisdictional management actions that reduce wildfire risk. This is especially important with respect to our Tribal partners and to working together to protect culturally significant resources and strengthen our support for post-wildfire restoration and rehabilitation needs.

Your Wildland Fire Management program staff represent America's commitment to working for the common good and treating everyone with dignity and respect. Together, we will promote a safe, ethical, equitable, and inclusive culture that preserves the faith and trust of the American people in public service.

We thank you for your service.