

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

August 23, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Haaland,

We write to you today concerning the destruction wildfires are inflicting across Washington state. Over the last several years, Washington has faced extreme heat and drought conditions, along with outdated forest management policies that have severely exacerbated fire conditions. These recent events have decimated critical conservation areas, including greater sage grouse recovery efforts, tree fruit operations, and cattle operations in Washington. We urge you to visit Central and Eastern Washington to witness the damage being done and the need for new solutions.

In Central and Eastern Washington, we are all too familiar with catastrophic-sized wildfires and their repercussions. Over Labor Day weekend in 2020, we witnessed a firestorm in Douglas and Okanogan Counties that was fast and destructive. The 189,923-acre Cold Springs Fire jumped the Columbia River to burn an additional 223,730 acres in the Pearl Hill Fire. The Cold Springs Fire burned so fast that one family was left stranded and severely burned while their son lost his life, and the mother lost her unborn child due to the extent of her injuries. Over the same weekend in Whitman County, the Babb Road Fire completely decimated the towns of Malden and Pine City.

Our towns are still recovering from the devastation of these events.

This year is no different. Just last week in Washington, there were 14 major fires. Nine of those fires burned or are actively burning in Okanogan County, and others pose significant threats to suburban and rural communities:

- The Cedar Creek and Cub Creek Fires, two active fires near the cities of Winthrop and Twisp, have already burned 123,939 acres and are still growing. These fires continue to threaten these communities and have halted the recreational activities the area depends on for economic viability.
- The Muckamuck Fire has been encroaching on the town of Conconully. This fire has already burned grazing permitted land and left no time to relocate the livestock in the area.
- The Walker Creek Fire and Chickadee Fire continue to burn between the towns of Tonasket and Republic. These two active fires are threatening over 900 structures where evacuation orders remain in place. Both fires continue to burn through grazing permitted land, logging areas, recreation sites, and lynx habitats.
- The Whitmore Fire is actively burning at 58,280 acres, and the Summit Trail Fire is at 42,670 acres. These fires are expected to grow even larger as they have minimal containment.
- The Corkscrew Fire north of Spokane has already claimed several homes.
- The Schneider Springs fire in Yakima County, northwest of Naches has burned just under 70,000 acres and continues to grow.

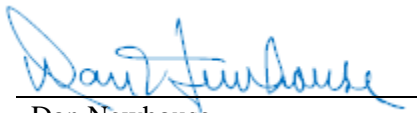
- The TwentyFive Mile fire in Chelan County just north of Chelan continues to grow in size and is only 8% contained.


Unfortunately, earlier this summer, the Colville Reservation was in the path of the Chuweah Creek wildfire. The Chuweah Creek Fire burned 36,752 acres, including three homes, and almost burned down the town of Nespelem. Washington State has faced significant challenges over the last decade with the persistent spread of catastrophic wildfires. Secretary Vilsack, you might recall the wildfires that occurred during your previous tenure as Secretary in 2014 and 2015 when the Mills Canyon, Carlton Complex, and the Okanogan Complex, among others, burned over 1.4 million acres. Much of the same areas are burning today.

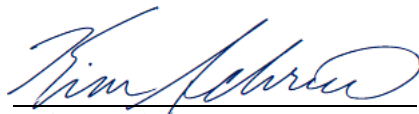
This year, Washington state continues to face severe wildfire conditions, and we are only just entering our fire season. For years, strategies to mitigate and fight wildfires have not yielded results – just look at the amount of damage that has occurred in Central and Eastern Washington over the last six years. Federal agencies must act now to address these devastating wildfires. We urge you to come to our districts in Central and Eastern Washington to meet with local leaders and hear directly from them on the challenges we continue to face. We hope to find common ground and develop new strategies to prevent and protect the lives and land that continue to meet these disastrous challenges. This is not the legacy we want to leave our children.

We look forward to your response and hosting you in Washington state.

Thank you,


Dan Newhouse
Member of Congress


Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress


Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress