

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 12, 2013

The Honorable Mary Landrieu
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
135 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dan Coats
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Landrieu and Senator Coats:

As wildfires continue to burn across the western United States, threatening lives, uprooting families and causing millions of dollars of damage, we write to express our concern that FEMA is currently allocating insufficient disaster mitigation funding to prevent and mitigate against wildfires. We request that your subcommittee use the fiscal year 2014 appropriations process to focus more attention on this priority.

The 2012 wildfire season was one of the worst on record, scorching over 9 million acres – roughly the size of the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. Nationally, the fires killed 13 firefighters and civilians last year, destroyed over 2,000 homes, and caused an estimated \$1 billion in economic losses. Massive fires in both of our states significantly contributed to this national toll. And this summer has brought a fresh stream of new fires, many of which continue to burn.

This is a national problem that is becoming more severe. The six most destructive fire seasons in the past 50 years all occurred since 2000. The overall suppression costs of these fires have quadrupled over the past 25 years, and at the same time, we have seen a significant increase in direct and indirect economic damage that these fires cause. In Colorado, for instance, the 2012 Waldo Canyon and High Park fires were the first and second most destructive fires in the state's history, until both were surpassed by this year's Black Forest Fire. That fire destroyed 498 homes just last month in a county still recovering from the widespread damage of the previous summer.

In light of the increasing costs and escalating destruction attributable to U.S. wildfires, we are concerned that the federal dollars available for fuel reduction and other wildfire mitigation activities are inadequate. Numerous studies have shown that targeted investments in mitigation and preparedness will prevent and reduce large-scale wildfires down the road, saving federal, state and local dollars in the long run.

In light of this challenge, we believe it is imperative that FEMA make more meaningful investments in wildfire mitigation in the coming years. We are concerned that, based on the latest available data, just .5% of projects funded through FEMA Hazard Mitigation Assistance over the past decade have been directed to wildfire-related projects. A 2007 CBO study of FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) program similarly found that a very small share of the agency's mitigation funding went to wildfires. Yet, in the same report, CBO concluded that these infrequently funded fire mitigation projects have one of the highest returns on investment out of all the different FEMA mitigation categories; CBO estimated that for every dollar FEMA has spent through the PDM fund on wildfire mitigation, it has saved more than \$5 in future disaster losses.

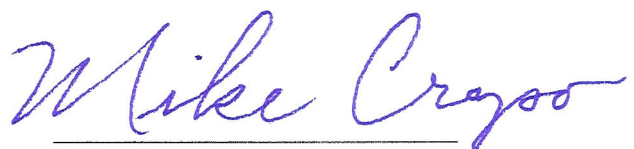
We ask you to work with FEMA to ensure that a greater share of its pre-disaster mitigation resources go to wildfire mitigation efforts. Requiring FEMA to report on its efforts to date to support wildfire mitigation projects, and its plans to support fire mitigation activities going forward, would be an important first step. And we hope to explore additional fire mitigation and preparedness options with the subcommittee, in order to prevent taxpayer dollars from being needlessly consumed in expensive fire suppression operations down the road.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Mike Crapo
United States Senator