Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 24, 2018

The Honorable Vicki Christiansen
Interim Chief
U.S. Forest Service
Yates Building, 4 Central
201 Fourteenth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Christiansen,

We write concerning the Forest Service's decision to reduce the number of air tankers with exclusive use (EU) contracts for wildland firefighting from 20 to 13.

As Members of Congress who hail from wildfire-prone states, we know our state and local firefighters count on Forest Service air tankers to provide key air support when containing the toughest wildfires. States across the West will experience harsher, more aggressive wildfire seasons, and we want to ensure that the Forest Service has the capability to meet the firefighting needs in high-risk communities.

The Forest Service primarily cites budgetary constraints as justification for cutting its fleet of air tankers with exclusive use contracts this year by 35 percent. We share the view that government agencies should be fiscally responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars and want to gain a better understanding of the Forest Service's decision to rely more heavily on call when needed (CWN) contracts instead of EU contracts. According to an analysis by Fire Aviation, the 2017 average daily rate for Large Air Tankers on CWN contracts is 54% higher than the same planes under EU. CWN contracts are also subject to aircraft availability and have longer response times.

For our communities, wildfire season is more than a budget-balancing act. When our friends and neighbors flee their homes to stay in crowded shelters and school gymnasiums, they do so knowing that our brave first responders have their back. When our brave first responders take on the aggressive wildfires that threaten our communities, they do so knowing they have critical support from the sky to help manage the blaze and hold the line.

To that end, we respectfully request you provide the data and research used to determine that a 35 percent reduction in the EU air tanker fleet was an appropriate decision for this fire season.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

Kyrsten Sinema
Member of Congress

Scott Tipton
Member of Congress

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