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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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SMALL BUSINESS AND  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

February 7, 2025

Acting Secretary Washington  
Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Doug Burgum  
Secretary  
Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington D.C. 20240

Acting Director Vaeth  
Office of Management and Budget  
757 17<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Acting Secretary Washington, Secretary Burgum, and Acting Director Vaeth,

I urge you to immediately exempt federal firefighters from the freeze on federal funding, to stop encouraging firefighters to resign, and to provide information on how these actions have impacted the hiring and retention of U.S. Forestry Service seasonal firefighters.

I write to you as the state of California starts the long recovery from devastating wildfires that tragically took the lives of at least 29 people, destroyed more than 16,000 structures, and have left countless families displaced. In January, California experienced some of the most devastating wildfires in state history, extraordinary in both their scale and timing. After weeks of battling these fires, we have finally reached 100% containment, due to the bravery and hard work of the firefighters deployed to these fires, including many federal firefighters.

This morning, I received notice that the federal hiring freeze has stalled the onboarding of thousands of seasonal firefighters. The memo issued on January 20 states that it does not apply to positions related to public safety, but this onboarding delay is directly contrary to that claim. Our constituents and communities rely on the hard work and sacrifice of our more than 15,000 seasonal federal wildland firefighters each year. Seasonal firefighters are essential to the public safety of those who live in fire-prone areas, and I am alarmed that federal firefighters are not

party to this exemption. In light of this, I am requesting information from your agencies explaining why the federal hiring freeze has extended to the hiring of seasonal federal wildland firefighters.

For years the National Incident Management System, through which these seasonal employees are organized and deployed, has been desperately short of firefighter personnel during times of extreme wildland fire activity in the west. Every year, our fire season grows longer, and our resources to fight wildland fires and to manage wildland fire hazards and risks are insufficient to meet that need. Forest Service personnel and equipment were critical to fighting the recent fires in Los Angeles County. Federal crews were even credited with saving an entire neighborhood in the Eaton Fire. I am deeply concerned that the hiring freeze will leave Californians and communities in fire-prone areas around the United States vulnerable. Any stalling of the lengthy process puts both federal forested land and Californians at risk.

Efforts to reduce the workforce are also detrimental to wildfire preparedness and readiness. Thousands of firefighters in probationary status are reportedly at risk of termination. The voluntary resignation letter was sent to firefighters, as well, which could further reduce capacity. These actions exhibit an abdication of your agencies' duties to protect communities around the United States, not just in California. I am requesting your expeditious response to the following questions no later than February 14, 2025:

1. Are federal wildland firefighters, seasonal or permanent, exempt from the federal firing freeze? If not, please explain why.
2. How many fire personnel applications, seasonal or permanent, are impacted by the hiring freeze?
3. How many seasonal wildland firefighters were hired each of the last five years?
4. How many seasonal wildland firefighters do you anticipate needing this year?
5. What is the anticipated shortfall of seasonal wildland firefighters this year and how does this hiring freeze affect that estimation?
6. Have any seasonal wildland firefighters taken the voluntary resignation option? If so, how many? How does the administration intend to pay for these voluntary resignations?
7. Will wildland firefighters currently in probationary status be terminated as part of the overall effort of federal workforce reduction?
8. To what degree was/are Mr. Elon Musk or representatives from the "Department of Government Efficiency" or "United States DOGE Service" involved in any part of wildland fire hiring, preparedness, or readiness work within your agency?

In the face of increasingly destructive wildfires, we cannot afford to diminish the tools at our disposal to fight these fires. Impeding the onboarding of federal firefighters and encouraging the early retirement of others, threatens California's firefighting capacity and puts communities at great risk. Californians rely on the support of federal firefighters, and I hope

you share my appreciation for the essential role these individuals play in keeping residents safe. I look forward to receiving your swift response to this time sensitive matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Adam B. Schiff". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "A" and "S".