

September 28, 2017

Sonny Purdue, Secretary, U. S. Agriculture Dept.
Ryan Zinke, Secretary, U. S. Interior Dept.
Congressman Greg Gianforte
Governor Steve Bullock
Senator Steve Daines
Senator Jon Tester

Gentlemen:

Subject: **Black Should NOT Be The New Green**

This is a plea for help to prevent future epic forest fires like we are experiencing in Montana. As you are aware, for the last decade or more we have had increasing numbers of wildfires with exponentially higher intensity and destruction. Currently more than 1 million acres of public and private lands have burned and 4,000 firefighters are fighting more than 40 wildfires so far just this season. Two firefighters lost their lives.

Last year I went door to door asking for signatures in our urban interface neighborhood to petition our local Forest Service to perform excess fuel reduction work on Forest Service land immediately adjacent to homes in the Bitterroot Valley. I stopped after collecting signatures from 90 households because I got tired. There was a 99% positive response to this request because people are ever more weary and concerned about the danger posed to firefighters and homeowners due to overgrowth of fuels that continue to grow to extreme danger levels.

Our local Bitterroot Forest Service Supervisor, Julie King, and her team of experts in various disciplines were responsive to our petition. They see the need for action and performed a study this year to determine through their formal process whether and how they could do the needed work. The project is in expedited review process now at the local level. The Forest Service has the expertise to perform the work, but are unduly burdened by environmental regulations that ultimately produce other priorities and lack of funding for prevention work. Some of their budget is also eaten up in avoiding or dealing with litigation by certain groups who may have had good intentions when they initiated laws to "protect the environment", but those stringent laws have resulted in dangerously unhealthy forests because they have impeded the Forest Service from doing the much needed thinning on federal land adjacent to private lands. The current designated roadless area maps have also impeded work as a safety buffer to protect homes near Forest Service land. Our local Forest Service lacks authority to revise those maps.

I believe it is commonly understood by many local residents that these increasingly devastating fires will continue to escalate until regulations are drastically revised to allow earnest forest management. By manage, we don't mean clear cutting the forest. Clearly the clear cutting model failed miserably. Now we also see the model of no fuel reduction/prevention work has produced extreme consequences including loss of lives, homes, property, wildlife, watershed, viable soils, crops, livestock, livelihoods, fencing, local economy, and beautiful scenery (not to mention almost unbearable unhealthy air for months on end).

We know we will always have forest fires in Montana and other places where there are forests, but we can do much more to save what we can that is near homes and towns. It makes no sense to spend little or nothing on prevention and billions of taxpayer dollars on fighting fires. Prevention work would not result in loss of jobs for firefighters because they could do the prevention work under more controlled and safe conditions.

IT'S TIME FOR THE POLITICAL PENDULUM TO SWING TO THE MIDDLE, AND YOU HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO PROPEL A MORE RESPONSIBLE POLICY IN THIS ADMINISTRATION. PLEASE HELP US BY:

1. Providing reasonable budget funding and priority policy for preventive fuel reduction work
2. Finding a way to limit wasteful litigation by extremist environmental groups who want to prevent all reasonable fuel reduction
3. Removing overly stringent regulations that constrain the forest service (re-visiting roadless designation mapping near urban interface areas to allow for a managed forest safety buffer)

Thank you, Senator Steve Daines, for your work in the Senate regarding this topic urging colleagues to get on board with helping us to manage our forests rather than the forest managing us. I am also encouraged to read that Secretary Purdue and Secretary Zinke seem to recognize the need to change our broken model. Please keep the ball moving. Don't allow the climate change argument groups to distract from the need to reduce fuel. We desperately need help NOW!

Respectfully Submitted,

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cc: Julie King, Bitterroot Forest Supervisor
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Ravalli County Commissioners
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