



Promoting Fire Ecology Research, Education, and Management

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The Honorable Mr. Sonny Perdue
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Mr. Ryan Zinke
Secretary, Department of the Interior
1849 "C" St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Perdue and Secretary Zinke,

October 9, 2017

With several months still to go, the 2017 wildfire season is already well above the ten-year average in number of acres burned, and the \$2.4 billion spent on suppression makes it the most expensive wildfire season in U.S. history. These costs don't include the lost lives, destroyed property, and long-term impacts on human health and ecosystems. Congress and the Administration are now grappling with what has become a chronic problem affecting federal land management agencies: wildfires that defy conventional firefighting methods, and suppression expenditures that exhaust annual appropriated budgets.

It is clear that new strategies for managing wildland fire and fuels are needed. Simply spending more money will not likely yield the results desired by the American people or their elected representatives. The Association for Fire Ecology (AFE) is an organization of wildland fire professionals dedicated to improving fire management through science and education. Our members from across the nation and around the world play key roles in wildland fire research, education, management, and policy. When proclaiming this week as *Fire Prevention Week*, President Trump stated the importance of “staying current with the latest fire-prevention techniques and raising awareness about fire-safety practices.” We fully agree, and as part of our mission we actively strive to get the best available fire science and technology into the hands of federal land managers.

One of the most efficient and effective ways for knowledge transfer and technology training is through face-to-face exchanges at conferences and hands-on workshops. This is especially true for rapid dissemination of the latest scientific discoveries and innovative management applications in wildfire science to address urgent public needs. In this epic wildfire season characterized by historic spending on wildfire suppression, there is an urgent need for fire managers and scientists to meet and discuss strategies for how to best provide for the public welfare by effectively managing fire and fuels into the future. For the cost of five retardant loads from a single large air tanker, over 110 federal fire scientists and managers staff could attend a typical fire management conference or workshop.

We wish to bring to your attention two upcoming events that, in the face of an apparent wildfire crisis, would help craft management and policy solutions to the wildfire challenge and potentially increase the effectiveness of fuels reduction or fire suppression expenditures. The 7th International Fire Ecology and Management Congress, held jointly with the 2nd Applied Fire Science Workshop, will take place in Orlando, Florida this coming November. The Fire Continuum Conference will take

place in Missoula, Montana, in May of 2018. Both events and locations are extremely timely: Florida and Montana had extraordinarily costly wildfires this year. These events could not come at a better time and place for confronting the current state of wildfire management and suppression spending. However, we are concerned that over 100 federal fire scientists and managers in the USDA and USDOJ have not yet received approval for conference travel to Orlando and will miss out on this critical opportunity for technology transfer and training.

For several years the Obama Administration had imposed an overly-restrictive federal travel policy that inhibited fire scientists and managers from attending science conferences and training workshops. While billions of dollars were spent on firefighting, fire scientists and managers were denied permission to participate in the knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and problem-solving that takes place during conferences and workshops- in order to save a few thousands of dollars. Given the keen interest of taxpayers, Congress, and the Administration to contain federal spending, we believe that use of the best available fire science and technology is critical in guiding preventative fuels reduction expenditures and cost-efficient and effective wildfire management strategies.

The value of federal employee participation in conferences was acknowledged by the OMB in the memorandum, "*Amending OMB Memorandum M-12-12, Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations*" (M-17-08). The OMB recognized that: "Conferences play an important role in the Federal Government, whether by enabling the sharing of knowledge among large groups, bringing together dispersed communities, or providing opportunities for interaction, collaboration and presenting cutting-edge work." OMB Director Mulvaney went even further and suggested lifting restrictions in his memo on "*Reducing Burden for Federal Agencies by Rescinding and Modifying OMB Memoranda*" (M-17-26). This memo directed the heads of executive departments and agencies to lift many of the counterproductive restrictions on federal conference travel. Indeed, the administrative costs of the Forest Service's Meetings Management System sometimes rivaled the cost savings from denied employee travel.

As taxpayers, our members share the goal of avoiding wasteful government spending, but restricting fire managers and scientists from meeting at conferences is a case of being "penny wise, pound foolish." We believe that the opportunity for scientists and managers to meet face-to-face to address current problems is a worthy investment of taxpayer dollars that holds one of the best hopes of developing solutions for reducing rising wildfire losses.

At this critical time as the smoke clears from the most expensive wildfire season in U.S. history, we implore you to authorize the travel requests of fire researchers and managers in the USDA Forest Service and USDOJ land management agencies, and allow as many of your employees as feasible to attend the International Fire Ecology and Management Congress/Applied Fire Science Workshop in Florida this November, and the Fire Continuum Conference in Montana next May.

Thank you for your consideration.

Signed,



Dr. Leda N. Kobziar
President and CEO, the Association for Fire Ecology