ALLIANCE OF FOREST SERVICE RETIRED FIRE LEADERS

POSITION PAPER

Realigning Wildland Fire Management to Strengthen the U.S. Forest Service Land Management Mission

A Companion Paper to the September 23, 2026 Letter on Wildland Fire Governance Reform, Centralization, and Unification

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Alliance of Forest Service Retired Fire Leaders

Central Proposition. Separating responsibility for managing the wildfire organization from responsibility for managing National Forest System lands can strengthen both missions: Forest Service line officers can focus more fully on stewardship of the land and strategic resources, while a professional wildfire organization manages readiness, workforce, and operational capability. The two missions must remain deliberately integrated where fire and land-management objectives intersect.

Purpose and Central Proposition

This companion paper expands the organizational argument presented in the Alliance's September 23, 2026 letter, which advocates a unified and consolidated U.S. Wildland Fire Service and, as an intermediate step, immediate centralization and restructuring of the U.S. Forest Service fire management program under career wildfire professionals.

Some concern exists that separating the wildland fire workforce from the U.S. Forest Service could hinder its broader land management mission. However, the Alliance believes that transferring direct responsibility for fire management, workforce operations, and readiness away from the general Forest Service line organization will actually strengthen both professional fire management and the stewardship of the National Forest System.

Removing responsibility for managing the fire organization does not remove wildfire from the Forest Service land-management mission. It distinguishes responsibility for managing wildfire capability from responsibility for managing the land, while preserving formal integration between the two.

The Organizational Problem

The Forest Service simultaneously manages the National Forest System and a large, specialized, high-risk wildfire organization. Although the missions are closely connected, their management requirements are different. Forest Supervisors, District Rangers, Regional Foresters, and other responsible line officers must lead the agency's broad land-management responsibilities while also carrying substantial fire-related preparedness, personnel, operational, administrative, and risk-management responsibilities.

Leadership capacity is finite. Requiring the same line organization to administer both land management and a specialized national emergency-response workforce divides executive attention, management capacity, and organizational resources. The September 23 letter identifies fragmented fire authority, workforce constraints, and inconsistent operational systems as structural challenges and proposes shifting technical, high-risk personnel oversight to credentialed fire professionals. This paper addresses the corresponding benefit to the Forest Service: restored capacity to lead its broader land-management mission.

Safety Culture, Operational Risk, and Management Systems

Wildland firefighting operates within a distinct high-risk professional culture in which leadership decisions, crew cohesion, operational discipline, and informed risk acceptance directly affect firefighter and public safety. A strong safety culture requires more than adherence to general workplace safety requirements. It depends on technically qualified leaders who understand the operational environment, encourage candid hazard reporting, recognize human factors and fatigue, and consistently reinforce the authority to identify, communicate, and mitigate unacceptable risk.

The organizational structure should support a comprehensive, fire-specific risk management system that integrates hazard identification, operational risk assessment, decision-making, controls, and continuous reassessment across preparedness, initial attack, extended attack, prescribed fire, aviation, and incident support. These processes must function at every level—from crews and incident commanders to geographic and national leadership—and account for the cumulative effects of staffing, work-rest cycles, resource availability, and changing incident conditions.

A unified Wildland Fire Service would provide an opportunity to establish a consistent Safety Management System (SMS) tailored to wildland fire operations. Such a system should connect executive safety policy and accountability with confidential and nonpunitive reporting, systematic risk controls, safety assurance, trend analysis, learning reviews, and measurable corrective action. The objective is not to eliminate operational risk, but to manage it deliberately and transparently through a learning-oriented professional organization.

Fragmented authority can weaken the consistency of safety expectations, risk ownership, and lessons learned across organizational boundaries. Placing wildfire workforce oversight, operational standards, and safety-system accountability under credentialed wildfire leadership would better align decision authority with technical expertise. Forest Service land managers would retain responsibility for land-management decisions and participate in coordinated risk decisions where wildfire operations and landscape objectives intersect.

Clearer Accountability: Land Management and Wildfire Capability

The intended result is not organizational isolation. It is clearer accountability: the Forest Service manages the land; the Wildland Fire Service manages the wildfire capability; and both remain formally connected wherever fire management and land-management objectives intersect.

U.S. Forest Service - Land Management Accountability	Wildland Fire Service - Fire Management Accountability
Land Management Plans and implementation priorities	Wildland firefighters and fire-management personnel
Vegetation management, restoration, forest health, watersheds, wildlife, and habitat	Preparedness, staffing, readiness, suppression operations, and incident management
Recreation, public access, special uses, infrastructure, facilities, roads, and trails	Aviation, specialized resources, fire intelligence, predictive services, and mobilization
Community, tribal, state, local, permittee, and partner relationships	Fire logistics, emergency communications, equipment, specialized fleet, and operational standards
Environmental analysis and regulatory compliance	Training, qualifications, workforce development, firefighter health and safety
Identification of values at risk, desired landscape conditions, and strategic NFS priorities	Fire-specific doctrine, policy, standards, professional accountability, and performance

Restoring Forest Service Capacity for the National Forest System

Separating direct administration of the wildfire organization can give responsible Forest Service line officers greater capacity to focus on the condition, use, restoration, protection, and long-term stewardship of National Forest System lands. That restored leadership attention can support:

- Active land management - vegetation treatments, restoration, watershed work, habitat improvement, forest products, and landscape-scale implementation.
- Sustainable recreation and public access - recreation infrastructure, developed sites, trails, visitor services, access, and special-use administration.
- Infrastructure - roads, bridges, administrative sites, recreation facilities, utilities, and other aging assets.
- Forest health and resilience - insects, disease, drought effects, invasive species, hazardous vegetation, and long-term landscape resilience.
- Partnerships and communities - stronger engagement with tribes, states, counties, communities, permittees, nonprofits, and other stakeholders.
- Project delivery - increased leadership attention to planning, environmental review, contracting, implementation, monitoring, and completion.

Wildfire remains inseparable from these responsibilities. However, managing wildfire risk on the landscape is different from managing the wildfire organization itself. Viewed through this lens, wildfire organizational reform is also Forest Service mission-delivery reform.

National Security and Strategic Resource Stewardship

The National Forest System is a nationally significant multiple-use public-land system whose stewardship contributes to national security, economic security, and domestic resource resilience. National forests and grasslands support timber and forest products, renewable and nonrenewable energy, critical and strategic minerals, watersheds, grazing, transportation and utility corridors, recreation, and other resources and infrastructure important to the Nation.

Forest Service planning guidance recognizes that energy and mineral resources on national forests contribute to national, regional, and local economies; that some minerals are critical or strategic resources needed for national security or high-technology uses; and that National Forest System lands may provide corridors for electric transmission lines and oil or gas pipelines. Productive forests also support construction, manufacturing, rural economies, and domestic material supply.

Forest Service leadership capacity is therefore itself a strategic resource. Forest Supervisors, District Rangers, Regional Foresters, and National Forest System leadership need sufficient organizational capacity to address increasingly complex decisions involving forest products, critical minerals, energy development and transmission, infrastructure, watershed security, community resilience, access, environmental compliance, and the long-term productivity of federal lands.

Transferring direct administration of the professional wildfire organization can allow Forest Service leadership to concentrate more fully on these nationally significant stewardship responsibilities. This does not diminish wildfire's national-security relevance: wildfire preparedness, mitigation, and response protect communities, watersheds, timber, energy and utility infrastructure, transportation corridors, mineral-resource areas, military-adjacent landscapes, and other strategic assets. The objective is to strengthen both responsibilities by assigning each to an organization designed and led for its primary mission while preserving deliberate operational integration.

Source note: USDA Forest Service planning guidance identifies renewable and nonrenewable energy, mineral resources, and utility corridors as National Forest System considerations and recognizes some minerals as critical or strategic resources needed for national security or high-technology uses.

Maintaining Fire-Land Management Integration

Organizational separation should mean separation of administrative and operational accountability - not separation of mission integration. The September 23 letter recognizes the risk of disconnecting fire professionals from Unit Line Officers and calls for integrated planning teams and annual operating mechanisms that connect fire-management planning to the Unit Land Management Plan, Fire Danger Operating Plans, and the Fire Management Reference System.

Forest Service line officers should continue to establish land-management objectives, desired conditions, values at risk, and management priorities. Wildland fire professionals should translate those objectives into preparedness, fuels, prescribed-fire, wildfire-response, and operational strategies, and determine how wildfire capability is organized, staffed, positioned, mobilized, and professionally managed to support those objectives.

This service relationship preserves shared mission responsibility while clarifying organizational accountability. It also provides firefighters and fire managers a clearer professional identity and chain of command in which personnel decisions, qualifications, readiness standards, staffing models, equipment, aviation, training, and career development are managed through credentialed wildfire leadership.

Accountability and Operating Interfaces

A transition must establish clear authorities before responsibilities are transferred. At minimum, the operating model should define:

Responsibility	Primary Accountability
Land-management decisions	U.S. Forest Service
Fire workforce and readiness	Wildland Fire Service
Wildfire suppression operations	Wildland Fire Service
Landscape objectives and desired conditions	U.S. Forest Service
Fuels and prescribed fire	Integrated planning with clearly assigned execution authority
Wildfire strategy affecting land objectives	Defined coordinated decision framework
Post-fire recovery	Defined joint responsibilities based on land ownership and technical function

Restoring Public Trust and Confidence in Federal Wildland Fire and Land Management

The ultimate test of reform is whether the public experiences stronger wildfire protection, healthier and more productive National Forest System lands, and government institutions that consistently deliver on their responsibilities.

Trust Through Results. Structural change alone will not restore public trust. Both organizations must define joint performance measures, communicate their respective responsibilities, engage communities and partners, and report outcomes transparently. The public should not have to navigate organizational boundaries to understand who is accountable.

Confidence in Land Stewardship. Restoring Forest Service leadership capacity can translate into visible progress in forest health, hazardous fuels reduction, watershed protection, recreation, infrastructure, and timely implementation of land-management projects.

Confidence in Wildfire Management. A unified, professionally led Wildland Fire Service can establish consistent readiness standards, transparent operational accountability, and a clear responsibility for protecting lives, communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Public trust is fundamental to the Forest Service’s mission. Communities, tribal nations, elected officials, and partners expect clear accountability, effective wildfire protection, and responsible stewardship of public lands. Organizational realignment offers an opportunity to rebuild confidence by assigning each mission to leadership equipped to deliver measurable results.

Strategic Outcome and Conclusion

The proposed end state is two organizations with clearer missions and stronger professional accountability that remain operationally connected wherever their responsibilities intersect.

For the Forest Service: Less organizational bandwidth devoted to administering the wildfire enterprise and more capacity devoted to managing America's National Forests and Grasslands.

For the wildfire organization: One professional wildfire workforce operating through standardized leadership, doctrine, readiness, qualifications, mobility, workforce development, and accountability.

For the public: Clearer responsibility for landscape stewardship and wildfire capability, supported by deliberate mechanisms that connect the two missions.

The organizational question is larger than where firefighters report on an organizational chart. It is how the federal government can structure two increasingly complex missions - land management and wildland fire management - so that each receives focused leadership, professional accountability, and sufficient institutional capacity.

The Alliance's position is that transferring direct responsibility for the Forest Service fire management program and its personnel to a unified professional wildfire organization can strengthen both missions. The Forest Service can concentrate leadership on the stewardship of National Forest System lands and strategic resources while retaining a

deliberate, formal relationship with the wildfire professionals responsible for protecting and treating those landscapes.

Removing the responsibility to manage the fire organization does not remove the Forest Service's responsibility to manage fire on the landscape.
It creates the opportunity for land managers to focus on managing the land - and for wildfire professionals to focus on managing the Nation's wildfire capability.

Relationship to the September 23, 2026 Letter

This paper is intended as a companion to the Alliance's September 23, 2026 letter, "Operational Perspective on Wildland Fire Governance Reform, Centralization, and Unification." It expands the letter's discussion of professional fire leadership, reduced administrative burden on general line officers, Joint Operating Agreements, integrated planning, and continued alignment between fire management and Unit Land Management Plans.

The Steering Group of the Alliance of Forest Service Retired Fire Leaders

In Coordination with the Forest Service Retired Fire Chiefs



Daniel L. Kleinman

Assistant Director, USDA Forest Service Retired