September 23, 2026

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Markwayne Mullin
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave SE
Washington, DC 20528

The Honorable Russell Vought
Director
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20503

Subject: Operational Perspective on Wildland Fire Governance Reform, Centralization, and Unification

Dear Secretary Rollins, Secretary Burgum, Secretary Mullin, and Director Vought:

We write to you today as a nonpartisan, voluntary coalition of retired Forest Service wildland fire leaders representing decades of collective operational and interagency experience. Operating as a unified working group of retired fire leaders, including Forest Service Retired Fire Chiefs. **The Alliance of Forest Service Retired Fire Leaders** is formed, and our purpose is to offer independent counsel on the structural design and performance of the national wildland fire system.

The systemic challenges facing our wildland fire workforce are clear: fragmented fire authority, critical workforce capacity constraints, and inconsistent operational systems across jurisdictions create escalating risks to land management and public safety. To establish a durable, accountable, and modernized system, **we strongly advocate for the creation of a unified and consolidated U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) centralized within the Department of the Interior (DOI)**.

As an essential intermediate step toward total interagency unification, **we also formally propose an interim strategy to immediately centralize and restructure the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) fire management program**. This strategy aligns the entire wildland fire organization under career wildfire professionals within a unified, centralized chain of command—from frontline firefighters to the Deputy Chief of Fire. This dual approach eliminates fragmented regional variances, elevates professional accountability, optimizes overall mission delivery, and organizes the USFS program to align seamlessly with the Department of the Interior's wildland fire structure.

True systemic reform must explicitly protect existing interagency relationships and mitigate transition risks without severing the essential ties between fire operations and broader land management objectives. To demonstrate the technical viability of this model, our proposed framework addresses five critical institutional areas:

- **Program Delivery Optimization:** Mandates that credentialed fire management professionals directly lead hazardous fuels planning. This ensures that Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) authorities, Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) priorities, and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance are engineered into the foundational design of every fire management

project, grounding decision-making in real-world fire behavior analytics while reducing project shelf-time and litigation risks.

- **Incident Management Infrastructure:** Enhances Incident Management Team (IMT) oversight, establishes objectives, merit-based performance reviews, and streamlines National and Geographic area multi-agency coordination. It provides a singular, predictable point of authoritative command that eliminates command friction and accelerates co-managed responses with municipal, state, tribal, and federal Unified Command Partners.
- **Support Function Integration:** Establishes formal Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and dedicated Technical Liaisons to resolve historical bottlenecks with non-fire support branches, including Fleet Management, Facilities Infrastructure, Equipment and Supply Logistics, and Information Technology (IT). This ensures that emergency maintenance, rugged field-performance standards, and mission-critical gear are prioritized during high-tempo operational periods.
- **Direct Support Standardization:** Centralizes the management of non-response personnel—such as Emergency Communications Coordinators (ECCs), fire logistics service and support centers, and administrative support—who are currently inconsistently scattered and supervised across different regions and units.
- **Phased Implementation Roadmap:** Outlines a 12-month phased transition roadmap. Phase 1 focuses on Audit and Alignment (30–60 days); Phase 2 executes the Structural Transition (90 days); Phase 3 establishes Standardization and Review (180 days). This framework unburdens general line officers and non-fire administrators by shifting technical, high-risk personnel oversight back onto credentialed fire professionals through formal Joint Operating Agreements.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

To evaluate the effectiveness and operational success of this structural reorganization, the agency will track metrics across four core areas:

- **Oversight & Accountability:** Percentage of fire management supervisors holding 100% of required incident command credentials for their role (Target: 100% compliance within 12 months of rollout).
- **Personnel Management Decision Efficiency:** Average processing time for critical personnel matters, including promotions, performance evaluations, and disciplinary actions (Target: 20% reduction in administrative processing time).
- **Program Standardization:** Variance in safety protocol compliance and budget execution scores across different regions and sub-units (Target: Achieve less than a 15% variance in standard policy adherence between regions).
- **Mission Effectiveness & Incident Response:** Review and establishment of the National, Regional, and Unit Preparedness Plans (Target: Improved preparedness and staffing goals for all 12 months for all resource types by Region, Geographic Area, and Unit).

Risk Assessment & Mitigation Matrix

Implementing a centralized command structure and realigning support functions introduces distinct organizational risks. The matrix below outlines these risks alongside targeted mitigation strategies to ensure continuity of operations:

Risk Category	Identified Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Organizational Friction	Resistance from non-fire administrators losing direct supervisory authority over local fire personnel.	• Establish clear Joint Operating Agreements that delineate operational fire command from general base/forest administrative support. • Conduct leadership workshops to communicate how this change reduces administrative burdens on non-fire managers.
Operational Gaps	Key personnel lacking immediate prerequisite incident qualifications during the transition phase.	• Implement a formal, time-bound Conditional Appointment framework. • Provide fast-tracked training and priority training academy slots to bridge specific qualification gaps within 12 to 24 months.
Indirect Support Bottlenecks	Delays or friction from support branches (Fleet, IT, Facilities) due to competing non-fire agency priorities.	• Mandate formal Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with non-fire support branches that establish binding timelines for emergency-use resources. • Embed dedicated FAM Technical Liaisons directly within procurement and fleet management units.
Planning & NEPA Disputes	Disconnect or friction between career fuels professionals leading National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning and agency environmental coordinators.	• Form integrated Interdisciplinary Planning Teams co-led by fuels professionals and environmental coordinators. • Establish standardized templates that pre-align fire behavior analytics with regulatory NEPA compliance metrics.
Line & Fire Staff Collaboration	Disconnect or friction between career fire professionals and Unit Line Officers for fire management planning, preparedness, and response.	• Form integrated Interdisciplinary Planning Teams co-led by fire management professionals and line officers for the development and maintenance of fire management planning documents aligned with the unit LMP. • Utilize Annual Operating Plans to validate and operationalize the Unit Land Management Plan (LMP), Fire Danger Operating Plans (FDOP), and Fire Management Reference System (FMRS).

The unified working group is committed to providing disciplined, evidence-based operational analysis to assist your offices during this active policy window. Our members participate strictly in their personal

capacities as private citizens; our credentials reflect our professional backgrounds, and our views do not imply endorsement by our former employing agencies.

We formally request the opportunity to brief your respective leadership teams on our initial systems crosswalk, interim USFS centralization strategy, and long-term operational recommendations for the USWFS. Thank you for your leadership and your dedication to the safety, professionalization, and resilience of our nation's wildland fire workforce.

Respectfully submitted,

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

cc:
The Honorable Stephen Vaden, Deputy Secretary, USDA
The Honorable Tom Schultz, Chief, U.S. Forest Service
The Honorable Michael Boren, Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment, USDA
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Mike Simpson, Chair, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Chellie Pingree, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Mike Lee, Chair, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
The Honorable Martin Heinrich, Ranking Member, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
The Honorable Bruce Westerman, Chair, House Natural Resources Committee
The Honorable Jared Huffman, Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee