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Memorandum

To: Chief, U.S. Forest Service
Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Director, Bureau of Land Management
Director, National Park Service
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

From: Deb Haaland
Secretary of the Interior

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture

Subject: 2024 Direction to Wildland Fire Leadership

Already this year, we have seen wildland firefighters work under extreme conditions to save lives and protect communities and natural resources from the devastating effects of wildfire. Thanks to your leadership, wildland fire personnel are always prepared to respond to wildfires no matter when or where they occur.

The weather patterns that drove the 2023 fire year in the United States, combined with the effective response of our wildland firefighters, resulted in less widespread large wildfire activity with more than 2.6 million acres burned despite 56,580 wildfires occurring across the country, according to the National Interagency Coordination Center. Several devastating wildfires nevertheless resulted in significant regional and local impacts, civilian deaths, housing and infrastructure losses, and resource damage. Fortunately, one result of this less widespread wildfire activity in the United States was that our wildland firefighters were available to assist Canada during its unprecedented fire year.

As climate change continues to drive the devastating intersection of extreme heat, drought, and the spread of invasive species, wildfire activity is trending toward increasingly intense, destructive fires that have profound impacts on our natural landscapes, communities, and public health. Wildfire is also becoming an emergent threat in areas that have little or no history of wildfire and during times of year when landscapes typically have not burned. It is more important than ever that we foster strong partnerships and work across jurisdictional boundaries to confront this growing threat. Last year, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council released an

update to the [National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy](#) to provide new guidance on addressing today's wildfire challenges, working beyond organizational silos to collectively define and mitigate risk. The Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture are working to incorporate these recommendations into our respective wildland fire management strategies, and we encourage you to embrace the tenets of the Cohesive Strategy.

The low number of acres burned compared with recent years allowed us to complete historic levels of hazardous fuels treatments and the highest-ever acreage of prescribed fire application. As you know, this work is necessary to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and reduce the risk that high-severity fires pose to public health, infrastructure, natural resources, and communities. This hazardous fuels work was supported by the historic investments from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, and those investments are paying off. Our two Departments will continue to work collaboratively with Tribes and other public and private partners to confront the wildfire crisis.

Effective wildland fire response requires a workforce that is fairly compensated and fully supported. The pay supplements introduced by President Biden in 2021, and continued through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and subsequent appropriations, provided the first meaningful pay increase for Federal and Tribal wildland firefighters in decades. However, the essential personnel who perform arduous, hazardous work to protect lives, communities, and landscapes will remain in limbo, concerned about their ability to make ends meet into the future, until a permanent pay solution is implemented.

Last fall, the [Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#) released its final report outlining a comprehensive set of recommendations to Congress to address the Nation's wildfire crisis. These recommendations provide strategies to transform our wildland fire response approach from reactive to proactive, build sustainable and long-term solutions, create communities and landscapes that are more resilient and adaptable to wildfire, and strengthen the wildland fire workforce. Proposed solutions strongly support increased collaboration and coordination across scales and jurisdictions and also ensures greater inclusion of all entities within the wildland fire system. Taken together, these recommendations will help lead the Nation toward a different relationship and experience with wildfire.

The President's proposed fiscal year (FY) 2025 budget builds on the Administration's historic investments in the wildland fire workforce at our two Departments by: (1) supporting permanent, comprehensive pay reform; (2) enhancing health and wellbeing services; (3) hiring additional permanent and temporary wildland firefighters to increase capacity; and (4) improving access to housing. These investments will help address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges, increase the Departments' capacity to complete critical risk mitigation work, and further the Administration's commitment to build a more robust and resilient wildland fire workforce. We will continue to work with Congress to pass a desperately needed permanent pay fix.

It is imperative that the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture work together to provide robust, year-round health resources and services to Federal and Tribal wildland firefighters. Both Departments continue to focus on development and implementation of the

Federal Wildland Firefighter Health and Wellbeing Program to take a comprehensive approach to mental health, physical health and readiness, and occupational and environmental hazards. This includes working on the requirements of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 and implementing the Joint Behavioral Health Program as directed by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. In 2024, we plan to establish an external contract for behavioral health clinical services, develop plans for a medical surveillance program, hire additional staff to support behavioral health, and assess long-term health effects on employees.

Our progress in many areas closely aligns with the Commission's vision. We support its recommendations and are committed to working collaboratively with our partners to address wildfire risk. Guided by the Commission's work and the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, both Departments will continue to work with interagency partners to meet today's wildland fire management challenges. Your leadership on our long-term strategies, increased investments, and improved workforce support is essential to meet the challenges of wildland fire management. Thank you for your commitment and coordination and for your service to our country and its people.