

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0505

April 15, 2008

The Honorable Ed Schafer
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer:

Last October wildfires raged across seven counties in Southern California in one of the most devastating fire seasons that California and our nation have witnessed. As you know, experts at the Department of Agriculture (USDA) predict that upcoming fire season will likely be as bad if not worse than last year. I write today to urge you to ensure that the United States Forest Service (USFS) has employed enough experienced firefighters to protect our National Forests and neighboring communities during the upcoming fire season.

I am extremely concerned that the recently released USFS Fire and Aviation Management Recruitment and Retention report fails to recognize the difficulties the USFS faces in retaining Federal firefighters in California. Though the USFS has become accustomed to firefighters resigning to work at state and local departments, the report does not address the ways in which these departures could leave our National Forests dangerously understaffed.

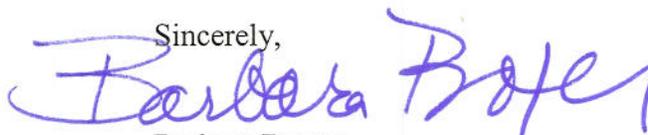
As the USFS crafts the report on firefighter staffing recently requested by the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, I ask that you work with the Federal firefighters serving in California to develop and implement a staff retention plan that commits to specific staffing levels and outlines long and short term strategies that address the unique challenges these firefighters face in California.

This plan should not only address the disparities in pay between USFS and state and local fire departments in Region 5, but also evaluate the widespread consequences of Federal firefighter job classifications and educational requirements mandated by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). It is essential OPM regards the experience and on the ground training of senior Federal firefighters with the same importance as the men and women serving with them in the USFS.

Unfortunately, fire is a fact of life in many parts of California and the nation. We need an intelligent approach to reducing the threat to these lands by giving support to land managers, and state and local communities who face the threat every year.

In advance, I thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Barbara Boxer
United States Senator