

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0309

January 22, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary-designate  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary-designate Vilsack:

Congratulations on your nomination to again lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I look forward to working with you and the USDA Forest Service to protect Arizona communities, wildlife, and water supplies from catastrophic wildfire.

Climate change, drought, and bark beetle outbreaks have contributed to the hazardous, fire-prone conditions of our National Forest System lands. These lands are uniquely important to an arid state like Arizona because they funnel precious water and snowmelt from higher elevations into reservoirs and rivers that supply drinking water to desert urban centers, including the City of Phoenix. Forest watersheds also support Native American communities, hydropower facilities, farms, and livestock operations. Water quality and quantity can become compromised when large swaths of our forestlands are scorched year after year.

Our situation has not improved since you last served as Secretary. In 2020 alone, wildfires consumed more than 700,000 acres in Arizona, the largest number of acres burned in one year compared to the last five years, and an area larger than what burned in 2018 and 2019 combined.

During the Obama Administration, you recognized the need to address the wildfire crisis by overseeing the rollout of the nation's first landscape-scale Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) known as the Four Forests Restoration Initiative (4FRI) in 2011. 4FRI aims to restore the ecosystems of four national forests in Arizona to their natural, fire-adapted state. Among other forest management tools, 4FRI uses Forest Service stewardship contracts to partner with sustainable timber harvesters and conservation non-profits to mechanically remove overstocked young, dead, and dying trees across a 2.4 million acre project area.

As 4FRI ramps up activity, there will be direct benefits to the USDA budget. As you know, Forest Service recently saw annual wildfire suppression costs across the nation exceed \$3.1 billion for the first time ever, consuming half of the agency's entire annual appropriation. According to the Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI) at Northern Arizona University, a founding member of the Congressionally-chartered Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute that advises the Forest Service on restoration activities, the cost of fighting fires inside the 4FRI project area drops by nearly two-thirds from \$825 per acre to \$287 per acre on land that has been treated.

Unfortunately, the first phase of 4FRI has not achieved the pace or scale needed to adequately treat our unhealthy and overgrown forests. Since Fiscal Year 2013, only 14,853 acres of the 63,000 acres in 4FRI task orders have been completed to date. This falls drastically short of the original vision of 4FRI, which is to mechanically thin 50,000 acres per year.

In an effort to accelerate forest restoration work, the Forest Service plans to issue a new round of 4FRI task orders under a new "Phase 2" plan with the goal of mechanically treating up to 818,000 acres. To accomplish this, the Forest Service will increase stewardship contract terms from 10-years to 20-years, which many hope will increase the capacity of Arizona's nascent forest products industry.

I would like to work with you to ensure that 4FRI Phase 2 is effective. Success depends on Forest Service awarding contracts that create a viable market for wood products in Arizona. Since December 2019, the contract award under Phase 2 has been continuously postponed by Forest Service while the sustainable wood products industry struggles to grow. Therefore, I respectfully request that once confirmed by the Senate you work through the Forest Service to ensure Phase 2 moves forward without further delay.

Thank you for your attention to this request. I look forward to meeting you and discussing this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Kelly". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" and last name "Kelly" clearly distinguishable.

Mark Kelly  
United States Senator