



HILARY S. FRANZ
COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC LANDS

August 23, 2021

Secretary Deb Haaland
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Haaland and Vilsack:

As Washington state's Commissioner of Public Lands, I oversee the state Department of Natural Resources (WA DNR) – the primary agency responsible for wildfire response and suppression across public and private lands. As the state's wildfire fighting force, we employ nearly 700 firefighters across Washington.

Our wildland firefighters face incredible hazards and life-threatening situations every day while on the frontlines. This year has presented the worst conditions we have ever seen. Due to extended drought and fuel conditions brought on by climate change and past land management practices, we are seeing extreme fire conditions not experienced in decades. Our firefighters have been working long-hours for months in challenging conditions with too few resources as many of our Western states face similar conditions. These conditions put our firefighters, communities, and natural resources at great risk.

Our wildland firefighters now face another threat – COVID-19 and the increasing danger from the Delta Variant. On the fire line and in camps, COVID-19 not only threatens the health of firefighters but our ability to deploy critical firefighting resources to the fire lines. At a time when we need them the most, we cannot afford to have any get sick.

Last week in Washington, a federal crew on its way to a wildfire threatening a community was forced to turn back due to its members contracting COVID-19.

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This was not the first time this had occurred. When one member of a crew contracts COVID-19, it forces the loss of the remaining members of the crew and it raises risks to other firefighters. Among WA DNR and contracted personnel, we are seeing increased infection rates as we near the peak of fire season. This has resulted in us having to remove engines and ground aircraft due to COVID-19 infections among firefighters and pilots. Pulling resources from the fight, when we are already stretched thin, has made a bad situation worse.

We cannot afford to lose a single firefighter or tool in our arsenal given the unprecedented fire danger that is threatening Washington's communities. Already, a record-breaking number of fires have burned almost half a million acres of Washington lands. And, with high temperatures and drought conditions expected to continue, there is no relief on the horizon.

With months of wildfire season still to come, we must do everything in our power – and work together across jurisdictions – to protect our communities and our firefighters in these extreme wildfire conditions. We cannot combat the increasing threat of catastrophic wildfire, however, without first prioritizing the health and safety of the firefighters who are on the frontlines.

This is why I have directed all Washington state Department of Natural Resources personnel, including our firefighters, to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 no later than October 18th. In addition, we are taking steps to immediately make COVID-19 vaccinations available to all wildland firefighters deployed to fire camps within our jurisdiction – a necessary step to fulfill our primary duty of protecting our firefighters.

Given the increased fire danger and deployment of federal firefighting forces across the Western United States, our mandate alone will not fully protect firefighters from the spread of COVID-19. Both of our teams work closely together on the fire lines and both of our teams depend on each other in these critical times.

I, therefore, respectfully urge you to require COVID-19 vaccinations for your wildland firefighting forces, in line with the measures our agency has already taken, and to deploy the extensive resources of the federal government to make vaccinations available at all fire camps in your jurisdiction.

The Biden Administration has already taken steps to encourage vaccinations for federal employees and contractors. The Pentagon has also taken steps to require vaccinations for military service members. Given the extreme conditions we are seeing on the ground and across the Western United States, and given our shared commitment to protecting the health and safety of firefighters first and foremost, we must do more.

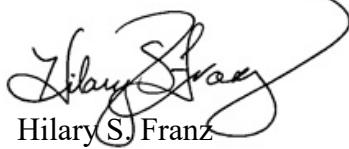
Secretary Haaland and Vilsack Letter

August 23, 2021

Page 3 of 3

As leaders of agencies with critical wildland firefighters, who are putting their lives on the line for our communities, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to keep them safe. Ensuring our firefighters are vaccinated against COVID-19 and making it easy for them to get vaccinations are first steps we can and must take.

In partnership,



Hilary S. Franz

Commissioner of Public Lands

c: Senator Patty Murray
Senator Maria Cantwell
Representative Suzan DelBene
Representative Rick Larsen
Representative Dan Newhouse
Representative Cathy Rodgers
Representative Derek Kilmer
Representative Pramila Jayapal
Representative Kim Schrier
Representative Adam Smith
Representative Marilyn Strickland

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