October 21, 2025

Sent via email

Honorable Bob Ferguson
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504

Re: Wildfire Response, Forest Restoration & Community Resilience Funding

Dear Mr. Ferguson,

I write on behalf of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation ("Yakama Nation") to express the importance of providing full funding of the Wildfire Response, Forest Restoration & Community Resilience Account to fulfill the commitment made with the passage of House Bill 1168 in 2021 to invest $125 million each biennium over eight years in critical wildfire resilience efforts.

Yakama Nation lands are experiencing longer, more intense wildfire seasons that impact lands on the Reservation and within our ceded territory. The cost of suppressing wildfires is rising rapidly. The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) reports that the average annual cost of suppression from 2019-2023 was over $2.9 billion – more than double the cost between 2009-2013.

Since 2021 the Account has facilitated meaningful progress, delivering on the commitment made to communities across the state:

- Wildfire Response: More firefighters are now on the ground with increased support from additional dozers, excavators, and air assets — strategically pre-positioned to reduce reliance on federal aid. Improved early wildfire detection systems enable faster response. These coordinated efforts ensure our firefighters can act quickly to keep wildfires from becoming catastrophic. Thanks in part to HB 1168, the number of acres burned has dropped dramatically: from 800,000 in 2020 to 680,000 in 2021, and under 200,000 in both 2022 and 2023. In 2024, we saw an increase to just over 300,000 acres burned — still well below pre-HB 1168 levels.

- Forest Restoration: Nearly 90,000 acres have received treatment from thinning and prescribed fire to boost resilience and better buffer communities across wildfire-prone landscapes. This work builds on broader restoration efforts, collectively impacting over half a million acres in eastern Washington. When the 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan was adopted in 2014, 2.8 million acres were identified as critically in need of restoration — then estimated to take 53 years to treat at the current pace. *Thanks to these funds, Yakama Nation was able to treat 705 acres within our Forest*.

- Community Resilience: Over 300 communities are now better prepared for wildfires, with more than 1,000 trained local leaders and hundreds of homes implementing fire-resistant upgrades, expert risk assessments, and vegetation clearing to reduce ignition.

These investments are helping make communities safer — saving homes and likely lives. However, the work has only just begun. We cannot be lulled into a false sense of security because investments so far have reduced the scale, intensity, and impact of recent wildfire seasons in Washington.

Transforming our state's relationship with wildfire requires more than that ramp-up of state agency efforts — local investments are essential. Community grants, a cornerstone of HB 1168, empower local communities to lead preparedness efforts and restore fire's natural role. Without full funding of HB 1168, these community-driven solutions will stall.

The $60 million cut made in the '25-27 biennial budget will reverse hard-won progress by stalling agency efforts and eliminating funding for community grants. We cannot afford to lose momentum when the stakes have never been higher.

Look to Oregon for our potential costly future if the State does not renew its commitment in the '26 supplemental budget: Last year, Oregon was forced into a special Legislative Session to approve an additional $218 million to pay wildfire response costs from the previous fire season.

We also face new challenges with a reorganization of federal fire programs underway, including proposals to consolidate wildland fire programs at the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. Both Departments are also experiencing significant workforce reductions that could impact their wildfire and forest management programs. To date the U.S. Forest Service has lost roughly 5,000 through the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP), and the Department of Interior lost an additional 7,500 through DRP. It is unclear how many of these staff had primary or secondary fire responsibilities. Given this uncertainty, it is more important than ever for Washington to strengthen its own wildfire response, invest in forest management, and ensure communities are prepared.

Yakama Nation urges you to include the remaining $60 million transfer in the 2026 supplemental budget to sustain proven wildfire resilience investments across Washington. As Commissioner of Public Lands Upthegrove emphasized in his September 15 letter, highlighting this account transfer as a top priority for his agency: “Without these funds, Washington could see an increased number of fires that are going to be larger and cost the taxpayers more money.” These investments not only pay for themselves down the line, but they are essential to protecting lives, communities, and landscapes across the Evergreen State.

Please contact the Yakama Nation via Phil Rigdon, Superintendent for the Yakama Nation Department of Natural Resources, at phil_rigdon@yakama.com for additional needs or questions.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Takala, Legislative Committee Chairman
Yakama Nation Tribal Council

cc: Shane Esquibel
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