United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 31, 2017

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

This year wildfires have rampaged throughout the West, causing extensive damage from Montana and Idaho to Oregon and California. As we continue to assist Texas, Puerto Rico and other parts of the country recover from damage caused by hurricanes so must we assist in the recovery of western states scorched by wildfire. It is critical to include additional disaster relief funding in the next aid package to help our communities recover and provide the Forest Service with additional resources to repair lands and infrastructure damaged by wildfire and reduce the threat of future wildfires.

First, we need to ensure the communities that have been directly and indirectly impacted by wildfire have access to programs to help their communities and economies recover. Programs administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD are critical to this recovery effort. However, a number of these programs are not nimble enough to help communities who endure hyper-localized damages. It is critical that appropriate adjustments are made to ensure these communities receive the help they deserve.

Second, we must include $200 million in emergency funding to repair and replace public lands and infrastructure damaged by wildfire and hurricanes. Without this additional funding, the Forest Service will be forced to postpone or cancel projects in FY18 to accommodate the recovery effort. This jeopardizes essential work like the removal of hazardous trees for public safety, road and trail maintenance, restoring vegetation in watersheds, and rehabilitating wildlife and fish habitat. Failing to adequately fund recovery now will only lead to more fire disasters in the future.

Third, we must seize the moment and invest $580 million to make our forests more resilient to catastrophic wildfire by investing in vital forest thinning and hazardous fuels reduction projects. On Forest Service land alone, 78 million acres are designated as moderate to high risk of severe fire. If we do not act quickly to fund the treatment of fire prone areas, the costs to fight and recover from these extreme fires will continue to grow.

Finally, as you are already aware, it is critical that we repay any transferred funds to cover the cost of suppression and enact a permanent fix to the problem of fire-borrowing. We cannot provide disaster relief to other parts of the country without assisting the western states scorched by fire as well.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Jon Tester
United States Senator