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To: Regional Foresters

This year offers us the chance to build on the progress we made in 2025 to strengthen our wildfire response and reduce risk across landscapes. Last year, despite recording the highest number of wildfire starts on national forests since 2016, we held total acres burned to nearly half the 10-year average. We surpassed our hiring target for operational firefighters, expanded premium pay incentives for our workforce and issued more than 22,000 red cards. Together with the Department of the Interior, we completed the actions in Executive Order 14308 and continue to jointly modernize and streamline the federal wildland fire system. This reflects the dedication of our workforce and positions us well for a strong, safe and effective 2026 fire year.

Predictive services indicates the 2026 fire year will challenge us. Lives, homes and taxpayer dollars are on the line every time a wildfire starts. Fire is a natural and necessary part of our landscapes, but catastrophic wildfire has significant negative impacts on communities and landscapes. When wildfires burn with extreme intensity, firefighters face enormous risk and communities and resources are damaged. Taxpayers shoulder significant recovery costs. Our collective responsibility is to reduce those risks through fire prevention, active forest management and decisive wildfire response with safety as our highest priority.

The safety of firefighters and the public is always first. Every unplanned ignition on National Forest System lands is managed under a full suppression strategy, and we will use best management practices for smoke. Guided by our safety principles and our risk assessment process, we will use direct tactics when conditions allow and indirect tactics when necessary. Our tactics may change with circumstances on the ground, but the goal to protect people, communities and important resources never does. In our continuing commitment to rural America and implementing the [USDA-DOI Grazing Action Plan](#), we will assign a wildfire liaison to wildfires specifically for the purpose of interacting with the ranching community wherever applicable.

Wildfire response is a shared responsibility; our mutual success depends on trust and coordination with partners. Together with federal partners, as well as states, tribes and local communities, we will continue to streamline process, create efficiencies and strengthen the interagency wildfire response system. These improvements will also help us continue to expand our active management efforts, providing for fuels and prescribed fire treatments across ownerships in the highest risk areas. We will continue to use science-based strategies, including the potential operational delineations, to ensure we do the right work in the right places. We will also continue to work with our partners to reduce fire risk and actively manage our forests. We have new shared stewardship agreements in Alaska, Georgia, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah and with the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and working on similar agreements across the country. Shared Stewardship turns shared priorities into real work on the ground—saw logs to mills, fuels treated and landscapes restored. Partners like the National Alliance of Forest Owners and Sierra Pacific Industries are partnering with us to create fuel breaks on National Forests and neighboring private lands. Active forest management, coupled with our continued focus on prevention, and



continuing our crucial hazardous fuels reduction efforts, will make the difference needed to restore resilient landscapes, especially in high-risk areas.

In FY 2026 prescribed fire operations will continue to anchor to risk-informed decisions utilizing dialogue between Forest Supervisors, Geographic Area Fire Directors, and executive agency leadership at Preparedness Level 3 and above. Eliminating unnecessary delays to active management, and strengthening collaboration, are as important as boots on the ground.

I expect leaders at all levels to prioritize:

- Firefighter and public safety at the core of all decisions.
- Aggressive, coordinated response to keep unwanted fires small.
- Resource readiness and availability for assignments.
- Fuels treatments and prescribed fire in highest-risk areas.
- Close coordination with states, tribes, local governments and contractors to achieve our goals and support the goals of states, tribes and local governments on their jurisdictions.
- Prioritize preventing human-caused fires
- Managing of employee fatigue and stress to sustain our operational effectiveness.

Acting on these priorities will allow us to respond decisively while keeping people safe and making measurable progress against wildfire risk.

As we move through the reorganization, the agency's Fire and Aviation Management program will retain its existing Geographic Area Coordination Center structure, which remains the backbone of national incident coordination. There will be no interruption or change to our field-based operational firefighters or their positions. The program reports to the Deputy Chief for Fire and Aviation Management.

I am proud of every firefighter, dispatcher, support staff member, agency administrator and incident management team member who makes this mission possible. The Forest Service has unmatched wildfire response capabilities. Our crews, aviation, equipment and logistical systems exist to support rapid, effective and safe operations. And I am proud of how the entire Forest Service supports our wildland fire mission. Your performance is the reason our strategy will deliver results. Your safety remains my highest priority. As we navigate the most challenging stretch of the season, remain focused on safety, support one another and keep executing with the professionalism that defines the Forest Service. Thank you for your service and commitment.



THOMAS M. SCHULTZ, JR.
Chief