
December 11, 2019

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretaries Bernhardt and Perdue:

In December 2018, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) to establish a framework for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and WGA to work collaboratively to accomplish mutual goals, advance common interests, and effectively respond to the increasing suite of challenges facing western landscapes. The MOU has helped Western Governors and USDA identify shared priorities and collaborative projects to increase active management on western forests and rangelands. Included is an effort, announced by WGA and USDA in June 2019, to improve vegetation management in and near transmission and distribution corridors to reduce the likelihood of wildfire.

As an initial step in the vegetation management effort, WGA assembled a work group of state and federal wildfire experts, land managers, and utility sector leaders to help identify potential improvements to current processes and practices to promote fire-resilient landscapes and communities across the region. At its first meeting in October 2019, the group recommended that WGA facilitate a conversation between USFS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), states, and the utility sector regarding key issues and specific actions to improve vegetation management practices in utility corridors. These included:

- The implementation of Section 512 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, as enacted by section 211 of Division O of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 (FY18 Omnibus).
- USFS's recently issued proposed rule on Land Uses; Special Uses; and Procedures for Operating Plans and Agreements for Vegetation Management within and along Powerline Rights-of-Way ([FS-2019-0019](#)).
- The FY18 Omnibus Bill's language encouraging USFS and BLM to develop training programs on vegetation management decisions relating to electrical transmission and distribution systems. The work group emphasized the need for any such training programs to be developed with input from the utility sector.
- The FY18 Omnibus Bill's direction to USFS to pair the Wildfire Hazard Potential index and map with spatial data, in consultation with state and federal partners, for use at the community level. The utility sector has access to spatial data on structures and powerlines that could prove invaluable in these efforts. The group emphasized the need for improved data sharing, accessibility and standardization.

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- An examination of the use of Good Neighbor Authority and Stewardship Contracting Authority and other authorities or actions to better leverage the resources of public and private partners (including utilities) to complete necessary wildfire mitigation work on federal lands.


Several western states are already working with federal agencies and electric utilities on projects to reduce the risk of wildfire in utility corridors, including policy reviews, task forces, and pilot projects. These efforts have established a substantial body of work on vegetation management improvements and, where relevant, should be incorporated into WGA's and USDA's work under the MOU. Greater collaboration on vegetation management in utility corridors can also benefit other areas of land management, including the increased control of invasive species in corridors to further reduce risk of wildfire and improve habitat quality.

Western Governors appreciate the engagement of USDA through the MOU on this important land management priority, affecting about 3,000 transmission lines on USFS lands. We also appreciate the involvement of BLM in this effort, as the agency administers nearly 17,000 utility rights-of-way on public lands. Your active engagement with states through the USDA Shared Stewardship MOU will result in more effective USFS and BLM policy and improved collaboration between states and the federal government.

Western Governors look forward to continuing this important discussion on vegetation management and are eager to make progress on this important issue. Thank you for your attention to the urgent need to reduce the incidence of uncharacteristic wildfire in the West.

Sincerely,


Doug Burgum
Governor of North Dakota
Chair, WGA


Kate Brown
Governor of Oregon
Vice Chair, WGA

cc: Vicki Christiansen, Chief, U.S. Forest Service
William Perry Pendley, Acting Director, Bureau of Land Management