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Date: FEB 12 2008

The Honorable Brad Sherman
United States House of Representatives
2242 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0527

Dear Congressman Sherman:

Thank you for your letter of August 29, 2007, expressing your concerns about the fire situation in California and the need to maintain fire crews. You asked what measures the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) is taking to address maintenance of qualified USFS firefighters now and into the future. It is a challenge to recruit and retain firefighters in Southern California and the USFS will continue to work to ensure that a well-trained and experienced firefighting force is available to address wildland fire suppression needs now and into the future.

Our Pacific Southwest Region employs more than 4,000 fire management personnel dedicated to protecting over 20 million acres of National Forest System lands in the region. Of these, over 1,700 are permanent employees. At this level, the Region is staffed at 90 percent of our full fire suppression capability. This force has performed in exemplary fashion over the fire season and during the recent devastating fires in Southern California.

While the quality of our firefighting force remains strong, retention of these employees is a challenge in Southern California. Attrition in any large workforce is to be expected, but the increasing resignation of young firefighters is a concern. An analysis of fire personnel attrition rates from 1997 through 2006 shows the average annual attrition rate of fire personnel across the Region was 7.7 percent. Resignations accounted for 49 percent of the total. On the Angeles National Forest, the 10-year average attrition rate is 8.23 percent, but over the past three years has increased to 10.8 percent. The majority of the resignees went to State, county, and local fire agencies and over 70 percent were entry-level employees. As you note in your letter, the area's high cost of living is a factor that contributes to high attrition rates.

The disparity in pay between federal wildland firefighters and State and local firefighters is not new. The USFS has worked to remedy this in the past with a special pay differential though this approach has not kept pace with increases in the cost of living. We are looking at alternative solutions to reduce this gap, assessing both pay and incentive options.

We are actively engaged in a review of the recruitment and retention issues in Southern California and elsewhere. As directed by the 2008 Omnibus Appropriations Act, we will present a report to Congress on this subject.

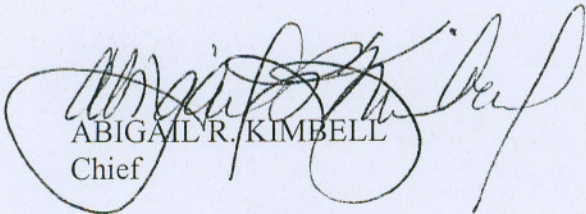


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2

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss options and gain your input. An identical letter was sent to Congressman Howard P. McKeon, Congressman Adam Schiff, Congressman David Dreier, Congressman Howard L. Berman and Congresswoman Grace Napolitano.

Sincerely,



ABIGAIL R. KIMBELL
Chief