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April 5, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Randy Moore
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Moore:

I write to request that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) fully fund and implement fire recovery efforts before the imminent arrival of the spring snowmelt runoff and seasonal rains, which may cause further flooding and damage to our watersheds, putting lives, homes, and critical infrastructure at risk. Due to the costly damage from several severe megafires plaguing the state, Colorado faces a funding gap of approximately \$146 million for fire recovery. Resolving this funding gap is time sensitive and I urge you to prioritize the prompt deployment of funds at your disposal through the fiscal year 2021 Continuing Resolution disaster supplemental, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the fiscal year 2022 Omnibus Appropriations bill, the Emergency Watershed Protection program, the Watershed Act, and any other appropriate fire recovery programs.

In 2020, two catastrophic megafires, the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome Fires, burned more than 400,000 acres in Colorado. These fires destroyed hundreds of homes, damaged critical infrastructure, and scarred crucial watersheds that provide drinking water to over 1 million Coloradans. When seasonal rains arrived in 2021, some communities experienced flooding and debris flows along burn scars that cost lives, destroyed additional property, and left water providers overwhelmed in their efforts to treat water supplies. At several points since these fires, water providers have had to turn off water supply intakes due to debris-laden floods clogging their intake systems. Continuing post-fire watershed mitigation is critical to preventing further loss of life and property and to protecting essential water supplies.

To date, the federal, state, and local governments have undertaken extensive fire recovery efforts, investing millions of dollars to restore our watersheds. However, tens of thousands of additional acres remain untreated and susceptible to erosion and debris flows. In addition, we must rebuild the infrastructure of our national forests that fires have damaged, particularly our roads, campgrounds, trails and other facilities on federal lands. The disaster supplemental and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law represent a significant down payment toward this long term effort to restore our watersheds, rehabilitate our forests, and prevent future wildfires.

This year, Colorado has experienced its shortest season on record without a significant fire – only three months in length. Climate change is exacerbating the frequency, size, and severity of fires. Megafires have now become commonplace and federal wildfire programs have proven to be inadequate to respond to these fires and perform large-scale watershed rehabilitation and post fire recovery. We need a new approach that empowers the agencies to respond with adequate funding in a timely manner so local and state governments do not have to carry the burden of post fire recovery for our federal lands.

I look forward to working with you to find a solution for Colorado’s short term wildfire recovery funding gap, as well as a long term solution to the challenges posed by a changing climate and the emergence of megafires in Colorado and the western United States.
Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a long, sweeping tail.

U.S. Senator Michael F. Bennet