



President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington DC 20500

August 15, 2021

Dear Mr. President,

We write both to thank you for the attention your Administration has provided to date on the twin challenges of our extreme drought and catastrophic wildfires and to provide recommendations for immediate additional assistance the federal government can provide to protect America's family farmers, ranchers, and fishers. Specifically, we are requesting that you declare a FEMA drought disaster in our states, allowing us to access additional federal resources.

Thousands of farmers in our states are experiencing devastating impacts from our ongoing drought. Although we appreciate the funding available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other sources, many of our local FSA offices are overburdened with requests and unable to help on the scale we need. Hay prices have skyrocketed, ranchers are selling off their livestock and others are considering selling prime agricultural lands for development. At this point there is little to no animal feed across much of the west, requiring farmers to import feed from out of state. Without substantial assistance, rural economies in our states that rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources will take years to recover from the effects of this devastating drought.

Beyond the impact on those industries and communities, the drought will have serious downstream impacts on the security of our food, fiber and energy production, both regionally and nationally. Those impacts include low or dried up reservoirs, increased algal blooms, a decrease in hydroelectric power and the potential of shuttering hydroelectric dams because of low water levels. Some drought-impacted communities are already running out of drinking water, a situation that could become much more widespread with prolonged drought.

Additional impacts are being felt by local economies reliant on the recreational economies developed around large reservoirs in our states. These economies have already suffered lost revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are now being devastated below water levels that preclude access and recreation on these waters.

The latest U.S. Drought Monitor report indicates 99% of the West is in a declared drought compared with 63% this time one year ago. Focusing on the top two intensity ratings (D3-D4), nearly 60% of the West is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought conditions. One year ago, the percent of the area in D3-D4 was less than 2.5%. Historic drought levels threaten to eliminate entire crops, depress yields and harbor extreme levels of pests and disease that add to the cumulative loss. It is estimated 59.2 million Americans live in drought areas.

These historic dry conditions have been exacerbated and accelerated by recent record-setting temperatures throughout the region. The National Weather Service recently reported that 67 weather stations in the West recorded their hottest temperatures ever. With temperatures reaching over 40 degrees above seasonal averages, agriculture commodities sustained a significant loss. As harvest continues and impacts are realized, the rapid evaporation of what little moisture was present and the exposure to intense heat and sun has devastated entire types of commodities.

As wildfires continue to grow in numbers and intensity, wildfires' direct and indirect impacts act as a force multiplier in the severity of hardships agriculture producers are experiencing. The heroic efforts of our wildland firefighters protect lives and property from devastation, but their capacity to mitigate all threats is limited.

Drought and wildfire impacts are also being felt by our wildlife resources. Species are not only being displaced by fire but are also suffering from limited water for survival. These impacts could have long term effects on species population numbers and their status under the Endangered Species Act. As you know, listing under the Act can have broad economic and social impacts that are significant to local rural economies.

We continue to do what is within our power, including working with our state legislatures and local governments to mitigate the immediate impacts of the drought, but the situation is now beyond our capacity as states or a region to manage without additional federal assistance.

We are eager to have additional conversations with you and your Administration about longer term strategies to make the west more resilient to drought, wildfires and climate change. However, at this time we are requesting that you immediately declare a FEMA drought disaster in our states, allowing our agriculture communities to access funding beyond what is available through existing emergency programs. We recognize that using FEMA funding for a drought is not common, but the Stafford Act specifically references drought as an eligible category of disaster.

We also ask that the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior evaluate grazing grounds and livestock feed opportunities that could be made available for emergency situations where lands can support the additional use. The drought and pest pressures have forced livestock ranchers and producers to relocate herds, open winter grazing grounds or reduce herd sizes due to the lack of available forage and feed. While USDA has utilized Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands, as livestock producers experience prolonged drought conditions and the residual impacts, these lands will exhaust their capacity.

We once again express our gratitude for your attention to the severity our natural resource economies are experiencing. We encourage the White House to consider and work with Congressional leadership for emergency assistance, including the possibility of allowing states to utilize existing American Rescue Plan funds for drought- and fire-related needs. To this end, we look forward to working closely with your Administration to discuss agency-specific actions and opportunities to leverage all federal and state resources to respond to the immediate impacts of natural disasters.

Sincerely,



Governor Spencer J. Cox
State of Utah



Governor Kate Brown
State of Oregon



Governor Gavin Newsom
State of California



Governor Jared Polis
State of Colorado



Governor Brad Little
State of Idaho



Governor Greg Gianforte
State of Montana



Governor Steve Sisolak
State of Nevada



Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham
State of New Mexico



Governor Doug Burgum
State of North Dakota



Governor Jay Inslee
State of Washington

CC: Deanne Criswell, Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency
Tom Vilsack, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture
Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Department of the Interior