

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 25, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Purdue:

As members of the Arizona Congressional delegation, we write to you about a matter of urgent importance: the contract award for the Phase 2 Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI).

As you know, the catastrophic fire season is in full swing in the West. In Arizona this year, there have been more than 1,600 wildfires and more than 700,000 acres burned which is more land burned than in 2018 and 2019 combined. Many of the forests contain low or no-value timber, which make them a tinderbox ready to combust into larger fires like we have seen in past years.

As USDA indicates on its website, “The overall goals of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) are to restore the structure, pattern, composition, and health of fire-adapted ponderosa pine ecosystems, reduce fuels and the risk of unnaturally severe wildfires, and provide for wildlife and plant diversity.” This is a laudable goal that we all support. However, in more than 10 years, just 700,000 acres have been treated out of the 2.4 million acres contained in the 4FRI footprint. Meanwhile, Arizona has seen some of the most devastating forest fires in the country’s history including the Wallow and Rodeo-Chediski fires that burned more than 1 million acres combined and the Yarnell Fire that took the lives of 19 of our brave and courageous firefighters. This dangerous history is why it is imperative that we jumpstart important forest health and watershed protection by expediting the award of the Phase 2 RFP for 4FRI.

Unfortunately, it is our understanding that the award of the Phase 2 RFP contract has been delayed again. Originally, Phase 2 was going to be awarded in December 2019. We have learned that the earliest we may see an award is December 2020, but that this could slip into 2021. Some of these delays are understandable due to modifications to the original RFP that will substantially improve the chances of success for this innovative and unique collaborative project. Since the RFP solicitation closed, Forest Service has revised its timeline at least two additional times and added upwards of six months of delays.

The success of this restoration effort is contingent on attracting and maintaining significant long-term investments by industry partners. This includes not only timber and transportation operators to perform the restoration work itself, but perhaps more importantly, the project also requires assembling a diverse array of consumers of the material removed from the forest such as saw mills, biomass energy producers and other innovative uses. The anemic progress of Phase 1 has already diminished industry capacity in Arizona and the extended delays of Phase 2 threaten to further discourage potential partners.


Entire communities, industries, and businesses across the state are waiting on the 4FRI project to move forward. The steadily increasing risk of wildfire combined with the economic uncertainty caused by prolonged delays means it is critically important for the Forest Service to expeditiously award this Phase 2 contract.


Therefore, we respectfully request that you provide our offices with an update on how the Forest Service may address these concerns within the Phase 2 contract review process as well as a date certain when you reasonably expect to award the Phase 2 contract. We ask that you undertake this in accordance with all rules, regulations and agency law.

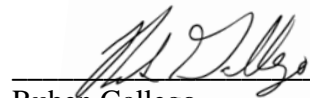
Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter, and please accept our best regards.


Sincerely,

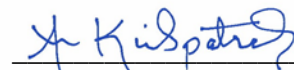

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Member of Congress


David Schweikert
Member of Congress


Greg Stanton
Member of Congress


Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Jim Hubbard, Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the
Environment
The Honorable Vicky Christiansen, Chief, U.S. Forest Service