United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 2, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
US Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20242

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We write to call for an investigation into the agency-level policy decisions that preceded the deaths of four wildland firefighters while responding to the Gore and Knowles Fires on June 27, 2026.

The four Rifle Interagency Helitack Crew members who lost their lives—Nick Hutcherson, Emily Barker, Sydney Watson, and Nathan Matthews—as well as the fifth firefighter who was severely injured, all acted bravely in their response to the Knowles fire that day. These firefighters grew up in communities in our states across the nation, but all found their way to federal wildland firefighting in Western Colorado, acting as heroes in one of the most severe fire years on record.

The tragedy of the loss of these four lives necessitates a thorough examination of departmental policies that guide fire suppression. This year has seen the highest number of entrapments in two decades, as well as the deaths of 13 federal wildland firefighters, pilots, and contractors in incidents across the West. Now is the time to examine the policies that can help us avoid any additional devastating losses.

The investigation should examine:

1. **Interior's "Full Suppression Strategy":** Specifically, we ask for a thorough examination of the Department of the Interior's policy which presumes a "full suppression strategy applied to every wildfire."[1] Fire scientists recognize that full suppression has made our megafire crisis worse by allowing fuels to accumulate.[2] While it is critical to protect communities at risk of wildfire, it is notable that the Knowles Fire was several miles away from the nearest town when the Rifle Helitack Crew was deployed. We call on Interior to closely examine whether value is added by presuming full suppression at all times, rather than assessing the risks to life, property, and resource values before determining the approach to any given fire.

2. **Direct Attack by Default:** An Interior memo additionally indicates that direct attack—meaning measures closer to the fire perimeter—should be the default in this full

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1 Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum. Memorandum on 2026 Wildland Fire Management Direction. April 8, 2026. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.azfirechiefs.org/resource/resmgr/2026/email2026/wildland-fire_management_dir.pdf

2 M.R. Kreider, P.E. Higuera, S.A. Parks, *et al.* Fire suppression makes wildfires more severe and accentuates impacts of climate change and fuel accumulation. *Nature Communications,* 15, Article Number: 2412. June 14, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-46702-0

suppression approach, rather than emphasizing key factors like fire intensity, flame length, and spread rates that may favor indirect attack of a fire.[3] The Department's investigation should detail whether a direct attack approach was used for the Knowles Fire, and whether that decision was influenced by the larger agency policy rather than an assessment of fire behavior, if so.

3. **Prioritizing Firefighter Safety in Decision-making:** Furthermore, we call on Interior to investigate how decision-making structures are prioritizing the safety of our firefighters. In the instance of the Knowles Fire, we believe the Department should examine whether information-sharing—specifically in regard to fire-weather and conditions—led to adequately informed decisions, and whether improvements can or should be made going forward. Notably, the National Incident Management Situation Report issued the morning of the Rifle Helitack Crew's deployment, predicted wind gusts of up to 60 miles per hour, low humidity, and a likelihood of severe impacts.[4] Still, the Rifle Helitack Crew was inserted into the fire two hours later.[5] And the crew remained on the ground, despite new ignitions, strong winds, and near-zero visibility, according to the preliminary reports from the ongoing investigation of this incident.[6]

4. **Shifts to Agency Structure and Staffing:** Additionally, this investigation should examine whether high-level changes to the agency's structure and staffing contributed to the events of June 27th. The Department's reorganization of fire activities into the U.S. Wildland Fire Service, which has not been authorized by Congress, merits review in the context of this tragedy and the high number of other incidents this fire season. Additionally, the Department should assess the impact of major staffing cuts and shortages on its fire suppression operations—a pressing question given that the agency has lost 17% of its employees,[7] and the federal wildland firefighters still on staff are covering the gaps with as much as 1,000 hours of overtime.[8] With major organizational changes and staffing losses, we are deeply troubled by reports of low morale and firefighter crews spread thin.[9]

We appreciate that a Serious Accident Investigation Team is conducting a review of the Knowles Fire incident, and we call on Interior to brief our offices on the status of that investigation.

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3 Ibid at 1.

4 Incident Management Situation Report Saturday, June 27, 2026 – 0730 MDT. https://www.nifc.gov/sites/default/files/NICC/1-Incident%20Information/IMSR/2026/June/IMSR_CY26_06272026.pdf

5 United States Wildland Fire Service & United States Forest Service. Serious Accident Investigation Team (SAIT) Update #1. July 30, 2026. https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/knowles-fire-entrapment-2026

6 Ibid.

7 Eric Katz. 'Going to be a s***show': Parks, Interior struggle to hire temporary staff ahead of busy season. *Government Executive.* May 14, 2026. https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2026/05/parks-interior-struggle-hire-temporary-staff-busy-season/413537/

8 Grassland Wildland Firefighters. Federal Wildland Fire Workforce: 2026 Survey Findings. May 2026. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/682782f2a74ed97f7aa5152e/t/6a13c50e402a0268b33e9e27/1779680526154/FGWF_Policy_Memo_2026+FINAL.pdf

9 Gabrielle Canon. 'We're near a breaking point:' firefighters say US government is failing them amid intense wildfire season. *The Guardian.* Sept. 16, 2026. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/sep/16/wildfires-government-firefighter-shortage

Interagency procedures require internal investigation to be completed within 45 days[10]—which means that the internal review should have been completed by August 11th. As of the writing of this letter, requests for a briefing on the status of this investigation have not been filled, and no new information has been provided since the issuance of a July 30th update on the investigation. The prompt release of this investigation's findings is crucial to public safety and to that of our wildland firefighters, particularly in this remarkably tragic year.

Wildland firefighter safety is a non-negotiable imperative. It is with this in mind that we call on you to ensure the Department takes a thorough, clear-eyed assessment of the multiple factors that led to four deaths and one serious injury in response to the Knowles Fire. We ask for you to ensure that this information is shared with our offices, and with the families of the Rifle Helitack Crew, in a prompt manner. This information is crucial to the healing of the families and to ensuring that we can learn how to avoid future tragedies.

Sincerely,

John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

Mark Kelly
United States Senator

Ruben Gallego
United States Senator

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

10 Interagency Serious Accident Investigation Guide. November 2013. Page 80. https://www.nifc.gov/sites/default/files/programs_documents/Interagency_SAI_Guide.pdf