

Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
May 15, 2019
10:00 a.m.

Oversight Hearing on
“U.S. Department of the Interior Budget and Policy Priorities for FY 2020.”

Questions from Rep. Rob Bishop for Secretary David Bernhardt

1. It is evident that due to a combination of factors, wildfires have increased in frequency, and in intensity. The past successive wildfire seasons across the country continue to grow in size and cost, year after year. Last year alone federal spending topped \$3.1 billion, the largest amount ever. The Administration, in concert with Congress, acted last year to positively address the issue of the escalating wildfire funding problem by enacting the bipartisan Wildfire and Disaster Funding Adjustment provision. This fix gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) the flexibility to ensure that land management agencies can fight wildfires—even during extraordinary seasons—without depleting much-needed funding from other parts of their budgets.

I note that the Administration’s overall FY 2020 budget request for wildfire management is down from FY2019 enacted levels, especially after Congress gave the agency the aforementioned flexibility. This overall reduction seems counter intuitive to implementing aggressive fuels reduction work and pre-suppression activities to help mitigate the incidence of catastrophic wildfires.

Could you tell the Committee how much money the Agency is proposing to allocate towards proactive measures, such as data on wildfire potential and watershed conditions to reduce the frequency and severity of wildfire events to high-risk, geographic regions?

2. In addition, more citizens are moving to “natural” areas. As a result, development has occurred to accommodate the influx which has resulted in fire departments combating fires along the wildland urban interface (WUI). WUI are defined as areas where homes are built near or among lands prone to wildfires. For clarification, WUI is not an actual place, but a set of conditions that can exist in nearly every community in the country. Under this backdrop, will the Agency dedicate resources to develop fire mitigation plans that require that the construction of new homes within the WUI must include requirements to install the proper water infrastructure to support firefighting resources commensurate with the risk?