



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES
OF CALIFORNIA

August 29, 2017

Mr. Tony Tooke
Regional Forester
USDA Forest Service Southern Region
United States Department of Agriculture
1720 Peachtree Rd., NW
Atlanta, GA 30309

Dear Mr. Tooke:

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), I am writing to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Chief of the USDA Forest Service (USFS). RCRC is an association of thirty-five rural California counties, and the RCRC Board of Directors is comprised of elected supervisors from those member counties.

One-fifth of California's land mass is managed by the USFS, and more than 70 percent of those lands are encompassed within RCRC member counties. RCRC has a long history of partnership and collaboration with USFS leadership and staff in the management of these national forest lands, and we look forward to continuing that partnership under your administration. With that in mind, RCRC would like to call your attention to some important challenges surrounding the ongoing management and health of California's National Forest system lands with the hope that we can continue to work together in resolving these outstanding issues.

California is facing a statewide emergency related to the recent five-year drought and subsequent bark beetle epidemic that has resulted in 102 million dead trees across the Central and Southern Sierras. Dead and dying trees dramatically increase the risk of large wildfires, and create public safety hazards in Wildland Urban Interfaces, around communities, along roadways, and in our recreational areas. The majority of the mortality is on national forest system lands, and while we have been working tirelessly with our USFS Region 5 and state agency partners to mitigate this disaster, more resources to address this issue could only benefit both USFS management efforts and the communities in and around those lands.

In fact, RCRC remains supportive of an increase in the general pace and scale of the management of our National Forest system lands, which not only benefits the health of the forests and prevents high severity wildfires, but also has the potential to create

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Mr. Tony Tooke
August 29, 2017
Page 2

enhanced opportunities for the communities that rely on the forests for tourism, recreation and other economic and social benefits. RCRC recognizes that one of the greatest barriers to enhanced forest management is the practice of “fire borrowing,” which has forced a shift away from fire prevention and forest health activities to focus more and more of your limited resources on fire suppression.

In light of this, RCRC strongly supports a change in the way forest management is funded. A system needs to be created in which wildfire disaster response is funded in a way similar to that of other natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds the response to those types of disasters out of a fund that is separate and apart from the costs of any preventative actions, and separate from any post-disaster clean up or mitigation of future disasters. RCRC has strongly advocated for legislation to end fire borrowing, and will continue our efforts in the coming months to aid the USFS in its efforts to improve the health and fire resilience of our national forest lands.

Finally, RCRC is concerned with the condition of some National Forest system roads in our counties in the wake of this winter’s severe storms and flooding. Many of our counties are experiencing difficulties communicating and getting sufficient response from local forest supervisors to adequately address the need to repair the roads, which are needed both for fire response access and for recreation and tourism use. Any assistance or guidance you can provide on this issue would be greatly appreciated as we continue to work with Region 5 representatives to address the problem.

RCRC once again congratulates you on your appointment, and looks forward to working with you on these issues in the near future. If you should have any questions or concerns about RCRC, please do not hesitate to contact me at gnorton@rcrcnet.org or (916) 447-4806.

Sincerely,



GREG NORTON
President and CEO