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March 13, 2025

Hon. Brooke Rollins
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Mr. Tom Schultz
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Rollins and Chief Schultz:

I write to express my serious concerns with your previous actions to terminate probationary U.S. Forest Service employees who hold Incident Qualifications Cards (Red Cards). With the wildfire season beginning in earnest in the Southwest, it is imperative that all Red Card holders are fully and quickly returned to duty status, not just administrative pay status as the Department is currently doing in response to legal action.

All Red Card holders play an indispensable part in responding to wildfire seasons, particularly as the seasons become more extreme. However, many of these Red Card holders were fired by the Department because they have titles like “forestry technician” or “recreation specialist,” rather than the title of “wildland firefighter”. This reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the role these individuals play in protecting our communities.

Terminating these employees because they were not considered wildland fire personnel contradicted the Forest Service’s own employee manual, which states that every employee must support wildfire response needs.¹ Wildfire response is one of the most dangerous jobs in our country and requires a robust infrastructure and supply lines to support front-line firefighters, from providing them with food and medical care to logistics experts to coordinate their deployment and public evacuation routes.

In New Mexico, we know that Forest Service professionals carry out a wide range of functions to keep the public safe while stewarding natural resources. Terminating these professionals and then refusing to bring them back into duty status put us all in danger. In the Gila National Forest, the Department terminated an entire trail crew that previously spent their days clearing debris from trails to make them safe for the community and help prevent catastrophic wildfire. Eight of the nine people on that trail crew held Red Cards, but because their titles are not a “wildland firefighter,” they were terminated. I have also heard stories across New Mexico of Public Information Officers who have been terminated despite their role in distributing vital emergency information, including local evacuation orders. Many of these officers also hold Red Card certifications to work on the front lines of a fire when needed.

¹ U.S. Forest Service. *Forest Service Manual 5100 – Fire Management; Chapter 5130 – Wildfire Response*. (Aug. 2020). Available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/regulations-policies/manual/5130-wildfire-response>.


Their job description may not list firefighting or cutting fire line as core duties, but they remain necessary to public safety and provide extra firefighting support.

I have heard that the Department of Agriculture initially intended to exempt some Red Card holders if their job is directly related to forest management. This is not sufficient. As you comply with the directives of the Merit Systems Protection Board to reinstate all fired employees for a 45-day review period, I urge you to ensure all fired Forest Service personnel are swiftly returned to duty status, not merely administrative leave, so they can be ready to mobilize as we approach fire season. Any further delays will be harmful to this year's fire response. I also call on the Department to cease any reduction in force actions that would result in the future termination of Red Cards holders without cause.

Secretary Rollins, you recently delivered a message of support to firefighters, saying "The U.S. Department of Agriculture has the largest and most sophisticated wildland firefighting workforce in the world, and I am honored to serve and support you."² Yet, by terminating Red Card holders, bringing them back only temporarily and only in pay status, you are dismantling critical pieces of this workforce.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
Ranking Member, Committee
on Energy & Natural
Resources

² The U.S. Forest Service. *A message of gratitude to U.S. Forest Service firefighters from Secretary Rollins*. (Feb. 2025). Available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/delivering-mission/excel/message-gratitude-us-forest-service-firefighters-secretary>.