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Date: JUL 18 2014

Mr. Dan O'Brien
Safety.Matters@aol.com

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

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Thank you for your letter of June 24, 2014, to Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack, cosigned by Ms. Holly Neill, Mr. Barry Hicks, Mr. Mike Warren, and Ms. Elizabeth Anderson, regarding your interest in enhancing wildland firefighter safety, and thank you for submitting your "Safety Matters Forum Briefing." Secretary Vilsack has asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to respond.

The Forest Service will review the report, consider your recommendations, and evaluate their potential effectiveness, and we will respond in coordination with other Federal, State, and local agencies and Tribes through the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), to which you also submitted your documents. As you are aware, no single agency or organization is responsible for wildland fire management in the United States; wildland fire management operations are interagency in nature.

I agree with you that the loss of life of wildland firefighters—or of any Forest Service employee—in the line of duty is tragic. However, I believe the assertion that wildland fire agencies are not doing enough to prevent wildland firefighter deaths is not supported by the record, and it is a disservice to the professionals who are currently engaged in wildfire management.

Unfortunately, as in law enforcement, structural firefighting, and other types of emergency response occupations, there are inherent risks in wildland fire management that can be mitigated but not entirely eliminated. The mission of wildland fire management involves the protection of the lives of citizens and communities, public and private property, and natural and cultural resources. Risk to wildland firefighters is only one type of risk among many in relation to the hazards posed by wildland fire.

Numerous efforts are currently underway in all parts of the Forest Service to enhance wildland firefighter safety, including research to inform safety zone guidelines, a review of fire shelters, and improvements in evacuation and medical care protocols for injured firefighters, to name just a few. I am confident that the men and women who are currently engaged in wildland fire management at all levels of the Forest Service are doing as much as possible to reduce the risk of accidents that result in serious injuries and fatalities.

Again, thank you for writing and submitting the "Safety Matters Forum Briefing." If you have any questions about the status of the review of your document and the consideration and evaluation of the effectiveness of your recommendations, please contact Mr. Tony Beitia, Chair, Risk Management Committee, NWCG, at juan.beitia@bia.gov, or (208) 387-5177. I invite you to share this response with the other members of your group.

Sincerely,

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TOM HARBOUR
Director, Fire and Aviation Management

