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Mr. Dan O'Brien
Safety Matters
P.O. Box 1217
Bonner, MT 59823

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

Thank you for your letter of September 2, 2014, to Agriculture Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack, regarding your suggestions for enhancing wildland firefighter safety. Secretary Vilsack has asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to respond.

I agree with your assessment that a focus on preventative measures is critical. In fact, the consensus among wildland fire agency leaders and senior staff is that the next frontier of dramatic improvement in our work lies in learning how to improve human performance at all organizational levels. The Forest Service, in collaboration with our interagency partners, will focus on developing a deeper understanding of, and enhancing our emphasis on, the human component of firefighting. This includes critical thinking, effective interpersonal communication, and improved ability to deal with operational complexity. We will share additional information about these efforts going forward.

We believe that improving human performance is vital to enhancing wildland firefighter safety and preventing all types of wildland firefighter fatalities, not just burnovers. I have full confidence in the men and women in the Forest Service and other agencies charged with enhancing wildland firefighter safety, and I trust their judgments. They have identified these measures and others as the best ways to enhance wildland firefighter safety, and I believe they are well-positioned to fulfill that task.

As I stated in my letter of July 18, 2014, the Forest Service will respond to your report in coordination with our interagency partners through the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). The NWCG Risk Management Committee will be meeting in October, and I am sure that you will receive a response to your report subsequent to their discussion.

Thank you for your sincere interest in enhancing wildland firefighter safety. I invite you to share this response with the other members of your organization.

Sincerely,

TOM HARBOUR
Director, Fire and Aviation Management

