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November 8, 2004

The Honorable Ann M. Veneman
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., Room 6151
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretaries Veneman and Norton:

We write you to share our continued support for pursuit of cost-containment efforts on suppression expenditures. With federal wildfire suppression budgets topping the billion-dollar mark three of the last four years and the state-share of spending on suppression increasing commensurately, wildfire suppression activities have become the driver for much of our forest health land management activities. This budgetary constraint severely diminishes our ability to use proactive fuel mitigation and restoration activities as the primary means to protect communities and natural resources. A governmental focus on cost-containment of wildfire suppression expenditures is pivotal to reversing the current situation.

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) recently released a highly persuasive report entitled, "Strategies for Cost-Management of Large Fire Suppression Costs." The effort to produce this report was chaired by Western Governors' Association representatives. While there have been many past reports on this topic that have led to efficiencies in managing the costs of large fires, those efforts have, at best, provided marginal cost reductions. To its credit, the recent WFLC report seeks to substantively address the underlying causes of large fire suppression costs. Because of that important distinction, we commend to you all seven of the following recommendations set forth in the WFLC report:

- Increase the level of accountability and interest for large fire costs and their impacts by allocating suppression funds on a regional or equivalent basis.
- Set policy and direction on agency land/resource management planning to incorporate cost management on large wildfires.
- Plan, budget, and manage resources effectively for large fire suppression such that resources for effective initial response and extended attack are not compromised.
- Ensure initial responses are always aggressive and driven by the principle of utilizing the closest appropriate resources, including those of local and tribal governments.

