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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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The Honorable Tom Tidwell, Chief
United States Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

April 8, 2013

Dear Chief Tidwell:

I write in response to the recent U.S. Forest Service controlled burn that took place in the Dakota National Grassland that resulted in the Pautre Wildfire, an event that affected thousands of acres of grassland and led to damages in property to many ranchers in the region.

The Pautre Wildfire was an avoidable event, and I am disappointed that the U.S. Forest Service made the decision to proceed with the controlled burn despite warnings from members of the grazing associations in the region. Specifically, concerns were raised about the dangerous wind and moisture conditions at the time the planned controlled burn took place. Additionally, I am alarmed that the U.S. Forest Service has communicated plans to move forward with controlled burns in the McKenzie and Medora Ranger Districts of the Dakota National Grasslands.

In light of the recent events, I request that the U.S. Forest Service halt all planned controlled burns in the Dakota National Grassland until drought conditions have subsided and the lessons of the Pautre Fire can be used to adjust the policies regarding controlled burns going forward.

I understand that the controlled burn practice, in the instance of the Pautre Wildfire, was used to remove standing dead crested wheatgrass plants within pastures of the Grand River District of the US Forest Service lands to enhance grazing conditions of the crested wheatgrass while protecting the native grasses. I also understand that controlled burns could potentially be used to combat invasive plant species, which is a worthwhile goal. However, it has been brought to my attention that research shows that controlled burns on native range land, to date, show limited benefits that result in improved health of grassland ecosystems and can even result in negative impacts of forage production. In light of ongoing research on the topic, I request that a review be conducted of the controlled burn policies in place at the U.S. Forest Service for national grasslands in order to determine how the practice should be best implemented in the future.

Finally, while I am encouraged that the Forest Service has taken responsibility for the actions that have taken place by agreeing to compensate ranchers affected by the wildfire, I write to stress the urgency at which the claims must be processed in order for ranchers to maintain their businesses and avoid additional harm from the lack of grazing for their cattle. I request that the Forest Service expedite the claims process to properly respond to this incident and rebuild the trust lost to ranchers in the region.

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Thank you for your consideration of my requests. I am confident that you will take every measure necessary to make whole the ranchers affected by the Pautre Wildfire, and I am grateful for your leadership in this time of need. If you or your staff have questions or require any additional information or assistance, please contact Jack Huerter in my office at 202.224.9894 or jack_huerter@heitkamp.senate.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Heidi Heitkamp". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator

Cc: Faye Krueger, Regional Forester of the Northern Region, U.S. Forest Service