

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

GREG GIANFORTE  
GOVERNOR



KRISTEN JURAS  
LT. GOVERNOR

June 16, 2021

Shawn Bengé  
Deputy Director, Operations, Exercising the Delegated Authority of the Director  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Bengé:

The State of Montana is committed to actively and meaningfully managing our forests to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, create healthier forests, and improve wildlife habitats. We are also committed to efficiently and effectively containing, fighting, and extinguishing wildfires. The state is eager to work with partners who are dedicated to promote these commonsense, mutual goals.

On June 9, 2021, I convened the governor's annual fire season briefing to survey the outlook for wildfire season in the State of Montana.

Senior officials and leaders from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services Division, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, among others, provided in-person briefings. A representative from the National Park Service (NPS) provided remarks via telephone.

When I asked Jay Lusher, regional fire management officer with NPS, if NPS would share Montana's commitment to an aggressive initial response to wildfires, including extinguishing fires, Mr. Lusher indicated some fires on NPS lands in Montana would receive that response. When I followed up to clarify whether all fires would be subject to an aggressive initial response, Mr. Lusher indicated not all fires would be extinguished when they are detected. I hope we can reach a resolution in which all fires on NPS lands in Montana, aside from those that are critical to maintaining a healthy ecosystem, will receive an aggressive initial response. The safety and wellbeing of firefighters and of surrounding communities depend on it.

I was on the ground in Glacier National Park in 2018 when the Howe Ridge Fire consumed and destroyed structures around Lake McDonald, including homes and historic buildings owned by NPS. I hope you are as committed as I am to avoid a repeat of the response to the Howe Ridge Fire.

We must have a coordinated approach to fighting fires in Montana, and that involves having a pro-active plan to ensure we promptly extinguish fires that threaten structures or put communities at risk. As you know, wildfires don't recognize borders and cease burning where federal lands end and other lands begin.

While we must protect the natural ecosystem, we must also protect Montanans' homes and communities.

I am concerned that NPS appears unwilling to commit to an aggressive initial response to wildfires.

I request a meeting with you as soon as possible to discuss how we resolve this issue and ensure wildfires on NPS lands in Montana receive an aggressive initial response. I am confident we can reach a positive resolution to this matter, as other federal agencies have expressed a willingness to adopt our approach to implementing an aggressive initial response to wildfires.

Sincerely,



Greg Gianforte  
Governor