

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 27, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

We write to request that the Department of the Interior provide emergency relief to farmers and ranchers severely impacted by the Lodgepole Complex Wildfire in Eastern Montana however possible and urge your consideration of granting permission to graze livestock on retired grazing allotments within the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge (CMR). Hardworking Montanans throughout the Eastern portion of our state have suffered at the hands of a severe drought of historic proportions this season, and this fire, impacting the largest surface area in the country at over a quarter of a million acres, has only created further hardship and devastation to farmers and ranchers in the region.

Less than a month ago, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue provided relief from the drought to Eastern Montana farmers and ranchers by authorizing haying on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage, but as this fire destroyed homes, fence line, livestock, hay supplies, and hundreds of square miles of range land in a matter of days, the need for additional relief cannot be overstated. The CMR provides an opportunity for displaced livestock to forage on lands where grazing allotments have been retired due to ranch sales. In an area that does not permit off road travel and where both farm equipment and terrain would be jeopardized due to the CMR's landscape, cattle will be able to forage in areas previously open to such use without compromising the important ecological characteristics that distinguish the CMR from other Refuges.

With the Governor of Montana recently declaring a State of Emergency and the urgent need to contain the fire and protect other threatened structures, it is readily apparent that the impact of this disaster will be felt on the community and the region long after the fire is extinguished. As a fellow Montanan, you understand the importance of our federal lands and the communities that depend on them. Balancing preservation, conservation, and production illustrates the many uses of our public lands. As agriculture is Montana's top industry and as you work to restore trust to the Department, neighbor-to-neighbor, ensuring options are available, where appropriate, to these farmers and ranchers is urgently needed.

We urge you to provide relief to farmers and ranchers impacted by the Lodgepole Complex Wildfire as fast and as appropriately as possible, including granting permission to move cattle on retired grazing allotments within the CMR. Thank you for your immediate consideration this request, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to assist Montana during this challenging time.

Sincerely,



STEVE DAINES
United States Senator



GREG GIANFORTE
United States Representative