



December 13, 2024

Honorable Dave Kinskey
Honorable Bob Nicholas
Joint Appropriations Committee
200 W 24th Street, Capitol Building, E201
Cheyenne, WY 82002

Re: Fire Mitigation/Restoration Letter (Letter # 1)

Dear Co-Chairmen and members of the Joint Appropriations Committee,

As outlined in my 2025/2026 Supplemental Budget request, the devastating effect of the 2024 wildfires did not end with the “traditional” close of the fire season. In some ways, much of the most difficult work lies ahead: assessing losses, inventorying compromised infrastructure, and evaluating economic considerations and viability going forward. Our latest figures indicate estimated state costs for suppression response to fires in the neighborhood of \$55 million. Wyoming saw approximately 2,021 wildfires, burning 850,425 acres. Of particular note is the fact that so much of the damage occurred on private and state lands. Of the total acreage burned, 70%, or 596,922 acres, were private and state owned lands. Non-federal acres will not enjoy the same federal cost share opportunities that federal lands do. Moreover, the bulk of the private lands impacted by this year’s fires are located predominantly in eight eastern counties. Recognizing this dilemma, I recommended the Legislature appropriate \$130 million dollars of one-time funding for restoration, mitigation, and recovery for damages to private and state lands, natural resources, families, and communities. Please bear in mind that as of the drafting of this letter, details as to the extent and dimension of the damage wrought by these fires are not yet complete. Still, while maybe not fully enumerated, the financial consequence stemming from these fires will remain the same.

Wyoming is one of five Western states without a state funded disaster aid recovery program. Over the past several years, our biggest fires have burned largely on federal lands. However, this year because the vast number of acres burned were private lands, traditional federal disaster cost share funds are unavailable or where available, available under different – mostly loan based – programs that may not cover as much of the needed recovery efforts. We are analyzing where gaps may lie and how timely federal aid may be for the challenges ahead. Nevertheless, this one-time request will (1) help defend burned and denuded lands from invasive annual grasses and

remediate wildlife habitat losses on state and private lands while also mitigating against the potential for recurring fires in the future, (2) recover and stabilize watersheds, (3) restore the loss of shared infrastructure (including fencing) on state and private lands, and (4) provide limited and targeted assistance to impacted families and businesses. To the extent fences were destroyed over so much acreage and properties, I submit the capital required to reconstruct decades of boundary fence makes them commensurate with irrigation infrastructure. I believe both should be considered similarly.

It is imperative to note, this request is not intended to be an ongoing program, but this effort will provide a template for recovery efforts in the future, if Wyoming has another extraordinary man-made or natural disaster of this magnitude. Already we have put together an effort under the aegis of the Grants Management Office to assist individuals in their efforts to find resources. This effort evolved from the work we did for those affected in the Mullen Fire in 2020.

As mentioned above this recommended amount is only a rough estimate and may well be insufficient. The estimate is based on acreages in the counties listed below that were affected by the Pleasant Valley, House Draw, Flat Rock, Remington, Elk Fire, Constitution, and other wildfires. Counties involved include Sheridan, Campbell, Johnson, Converse, and Platte. Importantly though, there were fires in Carbon, Fremont, Teton, Park, Crook, Weston, and Sweetwater too. While all counties could have access to these recovery funds under the guidelines being developed; the counties and acreages listed below were used to develop cost estimates for needed recovery efforts.

Campbell:	119,788
Converse:	7,531
Crook:	4,409
Goshen:	7,338
Johnson:	176,654
Laramie	24,425
Platte:	32,740
Sheridan:	205,234
Weston:	<u>3,468</u>
TOTAL:	581,587 acres

Using actual loss figures from Johnson County, and current pricing for fence replacement, the cost to replace fencing alone is \$46.9 million (610 miles/151,186 ac x 581,587 total ac).

Assuming half of these affected acres will require treatment for invasive annual grasses or will require some level of restoration to restore the ecological integrity and avoid rampant emergence of cheatgrass, medusahead, ventenata, or other invasives plants across these grassland ecosystems, at current prices will require \$145.4 million for invasive treatment (\$500/ac), and a minimum of \$116.3 million for restoration (\$400/ac). More likely, based on known reclamation costs in the Powder River Basin, restoration costs could be as high as \$400 million from all sources. It is worth noting that not every acre will need to be treated the same way. Using mapping and other tools, we can assure efficiency and best practice.

Insurance and existing federal programs may be able to offset some of these costs, but at this time, it is uncertain how much funding may be available through traditional programs. All of this leads to a degree of uncertainty about how much, where, and when funding will become available for affected landowners. These variables will become better understood in the fullness of time. Still, at best, these programs generally cover between 50% and 70% of the total cost for replacement and/or restoration, if the loss is even eligible for federal cost share. It is also highly likely federal emergency response funding will be over-subscribed (e.g., North Carolina victims of Hurricane Helene) and some Wyoming wildfire victims will be left with only state resources and charity to fill the gap.

Matching funds to meet FEMA requirements will be \$1.3 million, according to the Wyoming Department of Homeland Security. Based on past fires, the cost for erosion control/prevention of mudslides and impacts to watershed/municipal water protection/recovery would be \$3-5 million, per the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality. The estimated cost for replacement of impacted water infrastructure is \$10 million.

I recommend these funds be managed by the Wyoming Wildlife Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT) office for several reasons. First, the WWNRT staff and their board of directors have extensive experience evaluating projects designed to restore natural resources and funding for structures such as fences and other features to enhance habitat to benefit domestic stock and wildlife. Moreover, they coordinate well across agencies, local Conservation Districts, communities, landowners, and counties. Second, they currently evaluate and approve projects that reduce invasive grass species, which are often the first vegetation to grow on burned land. Finally, the WWNRT currently works with other state agencies and organizations with knowledge and contacts that will assure an efficient and effective process for the use of these funds. The WWNRT will regularly and periodically report the use of these funds to the JAC.

The recommended appropriation is to be supplemental to existing federal programs, including grant and loan programs available through the United States Department of Agriculture including

the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service or the Federal Emergency Management Agency. I recommend a requirement that applicants for these state funds must first apply any private insurance and apply for the applicable federal programs before approaching the state where applicable to demonstrate that a gap in recovery funding exists.

Because of the unique circumstances associated with these fires, I recommend actions funded under this program not be considered "large projects" under the traditional granting authority of the WWNRT. Instead, these funds would be allocated in an expedited manner, guided by the review process mentioned earlier to swiftly and efficiently assist in the recovery of state lands and to reach our neighbors in need within communities across Wyoming. They need resources to begin restoration efforts.

Finally, it is critical this funding request not be confused with other necessary funds associated with fires and other natural disasters, specifically those requested by State Forestry for fire suppression resources and Homeland Security for disaster response.

I look forward to working on the details with members of the committee in setting up the application, review, approval and reporting process.

Thank you for your consideration of this supplemental request.

Sincerely,



Mark Gordon
Governor

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