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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3303

June 19, 2012

The Honorable Kristin Bail
Supervisor, North Carolina
U.S. Forest Service
160 Zillicoa St. Suite A
Asheville, NC 28801

Dear Supervisor Bail:

On behalf of the roughly 700,000 Eastern North Carolinians that I am privileged to represent, I am writing to express deep concern over the fire that is now consuming a large portion of the Croatan National Forest. As you know, Forest Service personnel started this fire on Thursday, June 14th, as part of a "prescribed burn" operation. However, according to published reports, the fire quickly grew out control and now covers 21,000 acres, or roughly 32 square miles. U.S. Forest Service personnel have confirmed that none of the fire has been contained.

As a result, smoke and ash from the fire are negatively affecting air quality conditions from coastal North Carolina to Raleigh. In fact, state air quality officials have issued air quality warnings for Martin, Pitt, Washington, Beaufort and Hyde counties today, and they are expecting Code Red conditions in Craven, Jones and Pamlico counties.

I understand the Forest Service is devoting significant resources to the fire, including boots on the ground, bulldozers, helicopters and planes. If I can assist you in any way in securing additional federal resources to get this fire under control, I urge you to contact me directly as soon as possible.

That being said, I join many Eastern North Carolina residents who have contacted me in questioning why the Forest Service is in this position at this point in time. I have heard from citizens concerned that the fire is negatively affecting tourism in the region. Other citizens are suffering from the ill effects of the smoke and ash produced by the fire. And others are wondering if the significant cost that taxpayers are now paying to fight the fire could have been avoided through better Forest Service planning.

While I understand your attention is now rightfully devoted to getting the fire under control, once it has been contained, I strongly urge you and Forest Service leadership to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the policies and decisions that led to this incident.

I specifically urge you to provide answers to why a burn of this magnitude was scheduled for June, in the peak of the tourist season, an industry which is one of the primary economic drivers and sources of job creation in our region. The public also deserves to know why this burn was scheduled just weeks after the Forest Service issued a public warning about the "high threat of wildfire" on the Croatan. And finally, the public deserves to know what protocols the Forest Service had in place to contain the fire, why they failed, and what can be done to prevent incidents like these in the future.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Walter B. Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress