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James E. Risch
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July 10, 2024

The Honorable Randy Moore
Chief
Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Moore,

Across the nation, workforce housing remains a critical need. In Idaho, nowhere is this need more evident than among the seasonal and permanent federal employees of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and other workers serving natural resource and recreation-based communities. As this need continues to grow, we urge the USFS to approve the plans outlined in the Project Lookout proposal in Ketchum, Idaho, to mitigate this situation as soon as possible.

Fortunately, the Farm Bill of 2018 predicted this need and funded programs which can remedy this issue. Section 8623 of the Farm Bill, Authorization for Lease of Forest Service Sites, is such a program. Project Lookout in Ketchum meets or exceeds all the parameters outlined in Section 8623. The Forest Service has stated that the Ketchum Ranger District of the Sawtooth National Forest will maintain an office at the site even if a large housing project is established there.

Furthermore, Project Lookout is deeply aligned with the Forest Service's stated goals for a national housing strategy for agency employees. In an update from USFS in April 2023, the issue of housing was mentioned in depth, "it is imperative that our employees have access to safe housing while working on behalf of the American people." The agency then outlined five steps to achieve such a goal, which included "maximiz[ing] existing authorities to reduce the cost of quarters for permanent and seasonal employees and identify funding opportunities to make necessary repairs on housing." Therefore, we urge the Forest Service to recognize that Section 8623 and Project Lookout represent just such an authority, and to promptly review and fully consider the long-term lease requested by the Project Lookout application under current law and regulations.

The needs of USFS employees are aligned with community needs throughout the Mountain West, and Ketchum, Idaho, is one shining example. The critical workforce housing crisis has led to an inability to attract or retain staff due to housing costs. Project Lookout is a unique public-private partnership (PPP) development opportunity that meets the agency's stated challenges and directives by improving an underutilized site and transforming it into 80 units of affordable workforce housing for the USFS and Ketchum community.

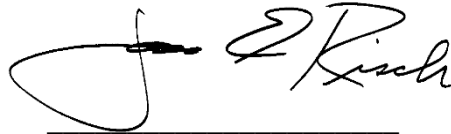
Finally, Project Lookout is broadly supported by the community and elected officials, and can serve as a model for PPPs and workforce housing development moving forward. This solution is supported by the Idaho Congressional Delegation, the City of Ketchum, the Board of Blaine County Commissioners and the community at large.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Please keep us informed of the timeline for consideration and outcome of the Project Lookout proposal.

Sincerely,



Mike Crapo
U.S. Senator



James E. Risch
U.S. Senator



Mike Simpson
Member of Congress