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Congress of the United States
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NATIONAL SECURITY

GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION
TASK FORCE
Vice Chair

November 19, 2014

Phyllis K. Fong
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Room 117-W Jamie Whitten Bldg
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Ms. Fong:

We are writing to ask you to investigate allegations of sexual harassment, attempted sexual assault, gender discrimination, and whistleblower retaliation in Region 5 of the U.S. Forest Service.

Recent news reports in the *New York Times* and *High Country News* have revealed a toxic work environment for female firefighters. One woman, Alicia Dabney, alleged that her supervisor put her in a chokehold and tried to rape her. She also claimed she received sexually explicit voicemails from her supervisor and found flyers calling her a “whore” in the fire station. An investigation into the flyer incident did not result in any disciplinary action. Ms. Dabney, however, was fired following her complaint. We are concerned that this action by the Forest Service was retaliatory and violated her whistleblower protections. Six other women also claim that they faced retaliation after complaining to the Forest Service about sexual harassment as well.

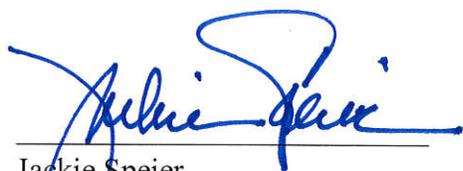
The Forest Service has taken a number of steps to address these problems, including increased training, revised procedures for addressing complaints, hiring more women to supervisory positions, and firing or encouraging the resignation of six supervisors accused of sexual harassment. Despite these efforts, firefighters tell us the toxic environment remains and that the complaint process continues to be too intimidating. The Forest Service points to decreased complaints in Region 5 as a metric of success. However, we are concerned that this may only be a signal that firefighters are afraid to risk their careers by coming forward or that they have been discouraged by past allegations of discriminatory and inconsistent procedures in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

As you conduct your investigation, we would urge you to consider the following questions:

1. Does the Forest Service have an adequate and fair process for reporting sexual harassment and gender discrimination?
2. Are complaints of sexual harassment and gender discrimination handled effectively and in a timely manner by the Forest Service in accordance with appropriate policies?
3. Did the Forest Service follow appropriate protocols to discipline employees that sexually harassed their colleagues or contributed significantly to a hostile work environment?
4. Were any of the complainants illegally retaliated against for making protected disclosures?
5. Does the Forest Service have sufficient mechanisms in place to assess the workplace climate, and could they benefit from regular workplace climate surveys?

The isolated nature of the firefighters' work in Region 5 makes employees particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse if the proper mechanisms are not in place, and we take allegations of reprisal against those who report these abuses very seriously. Thank you for your consideration of this investigation. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jackie Speier
Member of Congress



Peter DeFazio
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress