

August 17, 2026

The Honorable John Walk
Office of Inspector General (OIG)
Room 117-W Jamie Whitten Bldg
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Potential ethics violations related to alleged deployment of extra agency resources to respond to forest fire near Undersecretary Michael Boren's Idaho mega-ranch

Dear Inspector General Walk,

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington ("CREW") respectfully requests that the Department of Agriculture ("Department") Office of Inspector General ("OIG") investigate allegations of misuse of position and violations of other applicable standards of conduct related to Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment Michael Boren. According to public reports, Boren, who leads the U.S. Forest Service, requested that agency personnel "escalate the amount of aircraft at a seven-acre fire that had started near his mega-ranch in Idaho's Sawtooth National Forest" last month.¹ As wildfires burn across the country, threatening lives and livelihoods, it is imperative that OIG investigate whether Boren diverted extra agency resources to protect the area near one of his properties based on his personal interest rather than agency priorities, to the potential detriment of public safety and Forest Service personnel. If the conduct alleged is true, it would amount to a stunning breach of federal law and public trust that demand immediate accountability.

Factual background

President Trump appointed Michael Boren to lead the U.S. Forest Service, an agency that oversees roughly 200 million acres of national forest and public land,

¹ Brianna Sacks & Andrew Ba Tran, *Top Trump official asked for more aircraft to fight a small fire near his Idaho ranch*, Wash. Post (Aug. 14, 2026), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2026/08/14/top-trump-official-asked-more-resources-fight-small-fire-near-his-idaho-ranch/>.

despite what some described as a “scant resume” and his documented history of “clash[ing] with the [agency] numerous times over the years.”² One such dispute involved “building a cabin and clearing land” within Idaho’s Sawtooth National Forest near his Boise-based tech company and ranch property.³ Last week, *The Washington Post* reported that in July, while Boren was visiting his 480-acre Hell Roaring Ranch in Idaho, he made multiple requests that agency personnel augment their response as the Cabin Creek Fire spread in the region.⁴

According to the *Post*’s reporting, Undersecretary Boren, after learning of the fire near his property, “called Forest Service officials in the Sawtooth National Forest at the regional level and national operations in Washington multiple times to question why there weren’t more aircraft battling the fire.”⁵ Based on interviews and review of internal agency records, the *Post* found that “[i]n total, about nine aircraft, including helicopters, air tankers and tactical planes, responded to the blaze on July 12.”⁶ This effort, which was described by six current and former Forest Service employees as “greater than what is typical for a fire of that scale that did not pose a significant threat to life or property,” followed a series of calls by Boren to multiple agency officials, “including at least one in the middle of the night.”⁷ In those calls, according to a “Forest Service official with knowledge of the situation, Boren pushed for more aircraft to fight the fire” despite the fact that officials believed the fire “was easily accessible by ground.”⁸ The *Post* reported that the effort “lasted a few hours and cost nearly \$115,000 in federal money.”⁹ The *Post* analysis also found that at least some of the aircraft deployed to the area near Boren’s property “were diverted from efforts to contain fires elsewhere in the state.”¹⁰

In response to press inquiries, an Agriculture Department spokesman said that in his position, “[Undersecretary] Boren is expected to have regular contact with the agencies he oversees” and that he “called national fire officials ‘to report a fire that was near property he owns, just as one would hope any citizen in an area under threats from wildfires would do.’”¹¹ The Department spokesperson denied that Boren “pressure[d] leadership or order[ed] more resources to fight” the fire near his property, but that account was disputed

² *Id.*; see also Katie Hill, *What to Know About Michael Boren, Trump’s Nominee for Forest Service Leadership*, *The Meat Eater* (June 13, 2025), <https://www.themeateater.com/conservation/public-lands-and-waters/what-to-know-about-michael-boren-trumps-nominee-for-forest-service>.

³ Julia Jacobo, *Senate considers Michael Boren to lead Forest Service, despite clashing with agency*, *ABC News* (June 3, 2025), <https://abcnews.com/US/senate-considers-michael-boren-lead-forest-service-despite/story?id=122447202>.

⁴ Sacks and Tran, *supra* note 1.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

by an “official with knowledge of the calls.”¹² That official “described the interactions as Boren ‘putting pressure on [staff] to throw more resources at’ the fire.”¹³

Numerous experts suggested that the amount of resources deployed to quell the fire were unusual and potentially problematic. Former federal fire officials explained that “Boren’s requests could have undercut a national firefighting system that works to ensure that resources are allocated where they are needed most,” noting that his intervention in the process occurred “at a time when federal crews have been stretched thin battling wildfires across the West.”¹⁴ Steve Botti, a former National Park Service fire management official who now serves as mayor of an Idaho town near the Sawtooth National Forest told the *Post* that “[f]ire officials don’t usually like to pull resources off one fire and send them to another” as occurred here, “because incident commanders develop fire suppression plans based on the resources they have available.”¹⁵

Current and former Forest Service staff made clear that it is not atypical for government officials to flag the proximity of their land to wildfires, “but the staffers said it is unusual for an undersecretary to try to influence firefighting operations because high-level appointees often don’t have the full picture of what is needed for a given incident and region.”¹⁶ Although at least one local official described the federal response as “routine” at the time that he observed it, the *Post*’s analysis of multiple fires found that the response to the fire near Boren’s property “far surpassed the kind of responses the Forest Service mobilized for similar blazes this summer.”¹⁷

As part of his Senate confirmation process, Undersecretary Boren submitted an ethics agreement, which acknowledged his general ethics obligations.¹⁸ In that agreement, he clearly committed to not participate in agency matters that would affect his financial interests unless he first obtains a written waiver and to consult with agency ethics officials when actual or apparent conflicts of interest arise during his tenure.¹⁹

Relevant legal standards

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Letter from Michael Boren to Stuart Bender, Designated Agency Ethics Official, U.S. Dep’t of Agric. (Apr. 1, 2025), [https://extapps2.oge.gov/201/Presiden.nsf/PAS+Index/7BCAF5EBED4FD98685258C61002C8ADE/\\$FILE/Boren%2C%20Michael%20%20finalEA.pdf](https://extapps2.oge.gov/201/Presiden.nsf/PAS+Index/7BCAF5EBED4FD98685258C61002C8ADE/$FILE/Boren%2C%20Michael%20%20finalEA.pdf).

¹⁹ *Id.*

The allegations regarding Undersecretary Borden’s repeated intervention to deploy additional Forest Service resources to fight the fire near his property suggest potential violations of several rules that govern the conduct of Forest Service employees. For example, the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Executive Branch Employees, codified at 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101, outlines the “basic obligation of public service,” which is to adhere to all laws and ethical obligations above any personal benefit.²⁰ The Standards of Ethical Conduct also requires that “[e]mployees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual”²¹ and that employees may not use their public office for private gain.²²

The primary federal financial conflict of interest statute, codified at 18 U.S.C. § 208, bars executive branch employees from participating directly or substantially in a “particular matter” involving specific parties where one of the parties is their employer—the United States—and the other is one in which the employee has a “financial interest,” which includes assets or business relationships.²³ The definition of participation is fairly expansive and can include an employee advising or executing a “decision, approval, disapproval, recommendation, the rendering of advice, investigation, or otherwise, in a judicial or other proceeding, application, request for a ruling or other determination, contract, claim, controversy, charge, accusation, arrest, or other particular matter.”²⁴ Executive branch officials must strictly observe the limitations of their involvement in any matter that involves their personal interests, including property, and may only participate if they have sought and received prior approval of a waiver of these requirements.²⁵

Both the Standards of Conduct and the conflict of interest statutes are highlighted and linked on the General Ethics Laws and Regulations page of the Department’s website.²⁶ As a Senate-confirmed appointee, Undersecretary Boren received ethics training within 15 days of taking the position and is subject to annual training requirements, making him aware of the rules regarding financial conflicts of interest, impartiality and misuse of position.²⁷

Put together, these rules prohibit government officials from seeking personal favors and acting outside standard procedures or channels to seek agency action in any matter,

²⁰ 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101.

²¹ 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101 (b)(8); 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502.

²² 5 C.F.R. § 2635.702.

²³ 18 U.S.C. § 208(a). Other federal laws may require recusal in matters in which an executive branch official has financial interests in a matter that may be assigned as part of their duties (5 C.F.R. § 2635.402) or covered relationships with parties to a matter and cannot remain impartial (5 C.F.R. § 2635.502).

²⁴ 18 U.S.C. § 208(a); 5 C.F.R. § 2640.103(a)(1).

²⁵ See 18 U.S.C. § 208(b).

²⁶ U.S. Dep’t of Agric., General Ethics Laws and Regulations, <https://www.usda.gov/oe/rules-road/general-ethics-laws-and-regulations> (last visited Aug. 15, 2026).

²⁷ 5 C.F.R. §§ 2638.305, 2638.308.

while also barring officials from participating in agency decisions that would affect their personal interests, including their property. The allegations regarding Undersecretary Boren's multiple requests for additional resources to address a fire near his home, including potentially diverting resources from other fires in the region would implicate these laws and rules. Particularly when there are potential threats to people and property, government officials must perform their duties in an impartial manner based on the advice of career experts.

Taking action to deploy more fire fighting resources than necessary to protect an area that includes your personal property violates the standards of conduct. Deploying those resources despite the advice or opposition of federal fire prevention staff and diverting resources from other fires in the region would be an egregious abuse of power that threatens lives and livelihoods.

Areas for potential investigation

Based on the reports regarding Undersecretary Boren's conduct and the concerns raised by current and former agency staff, OIG needs to determine whether agency resources were deployed to respond the fire near Boren's property according to agency protocol or best practices, and if not, whether any divergence was based on incompetence or favoritism by Boren and others. Areas for potential investigation, but are not limited to:

1. Did Undersecretary Boren follow agency rules and protocol in his engagement with staff regarding the deployment of government assets in response to the fire near his personal property?
2. What additional resources were deployed to respond to the fire near Boren's personal property after his engagement with Forest Service staff about the fire?
3. Were any resources diverted from fighting other fires to respond to Boren's request? If so, what was the impact on other affected areas?
4. Did Forest Service staff feel pressure to deploy more resources than necessary to respond to the fire near Boren's personal property? Was Boren advised that Forest Service employees believed they were already appropriately responding to the fire near his property?
5. Did Forest Service employees raise concerns about the potential diversion of resources from other fires to respond to the fire near Boren's personal property? If so, did Boren overrule career experts in requesting the deployment of additional agency resources to respond to the fire?
6. How did the deployment of Forest Service resources to other similar fires this summer compare to the resources deployed to respond to the fire near Boren's property?
7. Were any agency personnel disciplined for reporting the fact of or their concerns with Boren's requests? Were any agency personnel disciplined for questioning or failing to comply with Boren's requests?

8. Did Undersecretary Boren seek and comply with guidance from agency ethics officials regarding the limits on his involvement in agency matters involving his property or seek a waiver under 18 U.S.C. §208(b) to participate in those matters?
9. Does the Forest Service have sufficient internal controls to ensure that wildfire response decisions are not subject to undue influence by political leadership and that concerns can be elevated for consideration?

Conclusion

The Forest Service “has been managing wildland fire on National Forests and Grasslands for more than 100 years.”²⁸ As the agency’s website explains, this work “is more important than ever because over the last few decades, the wildland fire management environment has profoundly changed” with “[l]onger fire seasons, bigger fires, and more acres burned on average each year.”²⁹ Public trust in the Forest Service is critical to ensure local, state and public cooperation to face this threat.³⁰ That trust is undermined if, as alleged, the senior political official leading the agency engages in preferential treatment to deploy extra resources to protect his lavish home at the potential expense of others’ lives and property. It is imperative that OIG investigate the troubling allegations related to Undersecretary Boren to determine what happened, whether federal laws were broken and to ensure accountability for any incompetence or deliberate malfeasance that may have occurred. Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Donald K. Sherman
President and Chief Executive Officer

²⁸ U.S. Dep’t of Agric., Wildland Fire, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire> (last visited Aug. 15, 2026).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*