

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 14, 2021

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

We write regarding the devastating impact of the several wildfires spreading across northeastern Minnesota and to highlight critical infrastructure improvements needed at the Ely Municipal Airport, which has been serving as a base for U.S. Forest Service aircrafts working to fight these fires. We urge the Department of Transportation (DOT) to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service to ensure that the Ely Airport has the necessary infrastructure to continue to combat the wildfires spreading across the region.

In the last month, roughly ten separate wildfires have spread throughout the Arrowhead region of the state. The largest of those wildfires, the Greenwood Fire near Isabella, Minnesota, has grown to nearly 27,000 acres. These wildfires have threatened public health and safety by destroying fourteen primary structures and 57 outbuildings, creating unhealthy air quality conditions, and forcing the evacuation of cabins, homes, and outdoor recreational areas.¹ As two of the region's critical highways were closed as a result of the fires, the Ely Municipal Airport in Northeast Minnesota has been critical to the region's firefighting efforts, serving as a base for U.S. Forest Service tankers, planes, and helicopters.

The Ely Municipal Airport is a publicly-owned airport located four miles south of downtown Ely, Minnesota. To continue to combat the ongoing wildfires, we must ensure that this airport has the resources to make critical improvements to its infrastructure—a key part of fighting these fires.

Currently, the airport needs funding to improve its apron and requires a new fuel tank to accommodate the various firefighting aircrafts—17 planes and 6 helicopters—needed to combat wildfires, which have been occurring on an annual basis. In addition, the Forest Service aircrafts are currently using approximately 11,000 gallons of fuel a day to respond to this emergency. Meanwhile, the Ely Airport can only store up to 12,000 gallons, leaving the airport to rely on

¹ Star Tribune. (2021, September 12). *Greenwood wildfire in northern Minnesota 67% contained*. Retrieved from <https://www.startribune.com/greenwood-wildfire-in-northern-minnesota-67-contained/600096446/>.

daily deliveries during a time when many parts of the country are facing an aviation fuel shortage.²

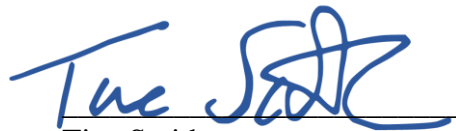
We therefore urge the Department of Transportation to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service to ensure that Minnesota's transportation facilities—and particularly the Ely Municipal Airport—are equipped to protect our communities from wildfires.

Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Pete Stauber
Member of Congress

² Isidore, Chris and Wallace, Gregory. (2021, July 27). *There's a jet fuel shortage at some US airports*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/27/business/jet-fuel-shortages/index.html>.