Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 14, 2011

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The funds that have been provided to date to the Black Hills National Forest (BHNF) through the Rocky Mountain Region ("Region Two") of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have been instrumental in the fight against the mountain pine beetle infestation. However, in spite of these efforts the mountain pine beetle problem is growing at an alarming rate, which coupled with certain factors unique to the BHNF, means that accelerated control measures are imperative. Due to this mushrooming devastation resulting in epidemic levels of infestation in the BHNF, and the exceptional proficiencies of the wood products industries in the vicinity of the BHNF to fully and immediately engage in thinning and logging, we believe additional 2012 funding for the BHNF is fully warranted. We respectfully ask that you consider our request as outlined in this letter.

The BHNF covers 1.2 million acres and differs from other National Forests in Region 2 because it is completely surrounded by the prairies and residents of South Dakota, Wyoming, North Dakota, Montana, Nebraska and Colorado. Because of this factor, the BHNF is a focal point of recreational opportunity over a multi-state area due to its easy access by tourists, hunters, anglers, and other outdoor recreationalists from all directions.

The BHNF timber industry in coordination with the USFS has provided noteworthy headway against the mountain pine beetle infestation; however, additional funding is urgently needed to continue the thinning and forest product removal at high enough levels to bring the mountain pine beetle invasion under control.

Every year is critical, and the explosion of mountain pine beetles in 2011 makes 2012 even more so. For fiscal year (FY) 2011 the BHNF mountain pine beetle funding for its base program and additional response funding totaled $9.5 million, which left a shortfall of $4.7 million. Despite the funding shortfall, the BHNF accomplished 200,479 ccf of timber sales, which was a notable accomplishment. Again, however, our ultimate goal is to corral the mountain pine beetle epidemic, and unfortunately, the beetle epidemic is still growing at an accelerated rate.

For FY 2012, $14.4 million has been requested for forest products and $3.7 million for forest health; however, initial funding of only $7.6 million leaves a tremendous funding shortfall to meet forest management levels necessary to stem mountain pine beetle infestations in the BHNF.

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The emergency situation in the BHNF created by the mountain pine beetle infestation makes our request for additional funding urgent in nature. As previously mentioned, the BHNF is a central multi-state focal point for tourism and outdoor recreation. Once additional funding is made available, the timber industry capabilities in and around the BHNF stand ready to aggressively pursue much-needed thinning and forest products removal in critical areas already approved under existing Forest Plans and the National Environmental Policy Act.

Accordingly, we respectfully request an additional allocation of $6.8 million to the initial $7 million in Timber Program funding allocated to the BHNF for FY 2012, plus the $3.7 million Forest Health funding. We understand these funding needs could also be met through other Budget Line Items, including, Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Management, and we urge you to consider your full range of options in meeting the BHNF's funding needs.

Thank you for consideration of our request and for your commitment to protecting and preserving our nation's forests. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Senator Tim Johnson | Senator John Thune | Representative Kristi Noem

cc: Mr. Harris Sherman, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
Mr. Tom Tidwell, Chief, U.S. Forest Service
Mr. Jerome Thomas, Acting Regional Forester, Rocky Mountain Region
Mr. Craig Bobzien, Black Hills National Forest Supervisor