

**OPENING STATEMENT OF
SENATOR LISA A. MURKOWSKI**

**COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
HEARING ON FOREST SERVICE BUDGET
April 16, 2013**

Chairman Wyden, thank you for scheduling this hearing. Chief Tidwell, thank you for being here this morning to help us understand the proposals made by the Administration in this budget request. I look forward to hearing your testimony.

The Forest Service manages some 22 million acres of national forest lands in Southeast and South Central Alaska. That is more acres than the entire 52 national forests located in the Eastern and Southern United States. The Tongass National Forest is 80 percent of the land base in Southeast. To say that the management vision and the decisions made by the Forest Service have an effect on the health of Alaska communities is an understatement.

And, right now our communities, particularly in Southeast, are not healthy. They are on economic life support.

Chief, I am concerned that the vision the Administration offers in this budget proposal for forest management looks more like one I would expect to be proposed by the National Park Service than by an multiple use agency with vast timber resources. Management under this proposed budget is focused on tourism and recreation and ecosystem values such as wildlife habitat. I agree these are important, but I must remind you that the fundamental tenet of multiple use also includes the development of our natural resources. And in Southeast Alaska, and I know in many rural communities across the West, harvesting timber is still the economic lifeblood. I look forward to you giving us some assessment as to how this budget will help us to continue to develop our natural resources and the jobs needed to produce them.

On the issue of timber production, this budget proposal seems to disregard the very commitment you made to “get the cut up” to Senator Wyden and me, just weeks ago when you testified before this committee on the secure rural schools program. At that hearing you

reiterated that the Forest Service would stay focused on meeting the 3 billion board foot timber target set for FY 2014 [in the 2012 report “Increasing the Pace of Restoration and Job Creation on the National Forest.”] You said then that you recognize the importance of increasing timber harvest levels to rural communities. This budget proposal instead proposes a timber target for FY2014 of 2.38 billion board feet. That is a 15 percent reduction from FY 2013 of 2.8 billion board feet.

In terms of timber funding, I am not even sure what that corresponds to, as I see that you have again proposed to change the budget structure to consolidate six key budget line items into one entitled the Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) line item. IRR makes it much more difficult to figure out how and where funding is spent, so maybe you can tell me what those numbers are.

Next, the Forest Service estimates that there are 82 million acres of the National Forest System in need of fuel treatments, but proposes to again substantially cut funding for the hazardous fuels program, by 37 percent to \$201 million, its lowest level in the last 5 years. This is significantly below the authorized level of \$760 million contained in the bipartisan Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

Chief, I hope you can explain to us what is going on here. I understand budgets are tight. I would suggest that instead of proposing to increase funding for programs like land acquisition in the budget proposal, the Forest Service should fund these core priorities. The Forest Service has its hands full managing what it currently owns. The last thing the Forest Service needs right now is more land to manage.

Managing wildland fires accounts for nearly 43 percent of your budget proposal. How the Forest Service configures its firefighting aircraft assets and the modernization of the aging airtanker fleet is something we are all following closely in this committee. Although there are proposed increases in this budget for modernizing, no further details are provided as to how that funding would be spent. I understand that the Forest Service has awarded some legacy airtanker

contracts, but not the next-generation large airtankers contracts. I hope you will be able to share with us today the agency's plans for modernization and the timelines for moving forward.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Secure Rural Schools and the way in which the Forest Service handled sequestration. For months the Forest Service was aware of the pending automatic spending reductions that would occur under sequestration. Yet, it appears the Forest Service did nothing to inform or prepare states, counties and boroughs for the possibility that this program could see reductions. I hope you can touch on this and enlighten us, Chief, as to what was going on here and what the status of it all is.

Mr. Chairman I will have a number of questions that I want to ask after we have heard from the Chief of the Forest Service and his staff. Thank you.

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