

Opening Statement
Chairman Ron Wyden (D-OR)
Wildland Fire Management Oversight Hearing
June 4, 2013
As prepared for delivery

Good morning. The purpose of this morning's hearing is to discuss wildland fire management.

The 2013 fire season has hardly begun, and yet Southern California and yet hundreds of families in California and New Mexico have already been forced to evacuate in the face of raging fires. As we speak, a major fire is burning on national forest lands just 25 miles outside of Santa Fe.

These latest fires are part of an ominous trend toward a bigger, longer hotter fire season. In 2012, 15 firefighters died combating blazes that engulfed more than 9 million acres in the Western United States. Two air tankers crashed. And more than 4,200 homes and other structures were destroyed, well over annual averages.

Federal agencies responsible for protecting Western communities from these fires must use the smartest, most cost-

effective fighting strategies possible. As the risks from wildfire escalate, the status quo simply is not going to be good enough.

These intense fire seasons also present direct threats to America's communities. The Waldo Canyon fire in Colorado last year, for example, burned 346 buildings and led to insurance claims totaling more than \$350 million.

2013 is predicted to again be an intense fire season. Fires have already begun in my home state of Oregon, even in the western part of our state which is typically less fire-prone.

Last week at town hall meetings and other gatherings in Oregon, I heard from plenty of people who are concerned about whether the government is prepared for a major fire season.

Forecasts show that the challenges posed by wildfire are only going to grow in the coming years. The summer of 2012 was the third-warmest on record and included the warmest July on record in our country. The overall trend of increasing drought and wildfire in the West and Southwest has been attributed in numerous scientific reports to human-induced climate change. Scientific reports also

confirm that the wildland fire season is becoming longer and more intense due to climate change.

Today we have an expert panel of witnesses to explore the topic of wildland fire management. I want to make just three points and then I want to recognize my friend and colleague Senator Murkowski:

First, there are actions the Federal government can take that not only reduce the risk of catastrophic fire but also save our taxpayers money. Studies have confirmed that wildland fire prevention activities, such as hazardous fuels treatments and restoration, can in fact reduce fire suppression costs. And yet, this year's budget request from the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior calls for dramatic cuts to hazardous fuels treatments.

Today the committee will hear from Diane Vosick at the Ecological Restoration Institute about a report they have assembled about the economic benefits of hazardous fuels projects. Especially at a time when folks are hurting in rural America, in Oregon's timber communities, for example, where they desperately want to get back to work in the woods, these projects seem to be some of the best investments the government can make. We are going to ask a number of questions so we can get into this baffling OMB position that there

is no significant justification for the requests that are being made for these hazardous fuels treatment funds. My own take is that investing in these kinds of fire prevention activities is exactly what's needed and we will be getting into that issue.

Second, our current fleet of air tankers is so ancient that they are probably better placed in museums than in the sky. In 2002, the Forest Service had 44 air tankers under contract, and they currently only have 8. I am, encouraged by the announcement last month that the Forest Service is seeking 5 new "Next Generation" air tanker contracts. These air tankers are vital to helping firefighters on the ground keep ever-more destructive wildfires from threatening communities across the West year after year. I do know that at least one protest has been filed to the Next Generation air tanker proposal. I do understand Forest Service yesterday was able to award 3 of the Next Generation contracts while it continues to work on the protest. I look forward to hearing from the Chief and others about what they are going to be doing to get these planes up and ready to fly as soon as possible.

Finally, I want to focus on the fires budget. The proportion of the Forest Service budget devoted to wildland fire management has increased steadily from 13 percent of the budget in 1991 to 41

percent of the budget in 2013. In many recent years, the Forest Service has exceeded its budget for wildfire suppression, requiring it to transfer funds from other projects — colloquially called “fire borrowing”— to cover emergency wildfire suppression costs.

The FLAME Act, was enacted in 2009 to establish a reserve of funding for emergency wildland fires that would be available to fight just those situations. Specifically, the FLAME Act establishes a fund to cover the costs of large or complex wildfire events and to serve as a reserve when amounts provided for wildfire suppression appropriation accounts were exhausted.

Unfortunately, the Office of Management and Budget has not been implementing the FLAME Act as intended—instead they calculate the FLAME Fund as a part of the 10-year average cost of fire suppression. It is time for the Office of Management and Budget to actually implement this law as intended.

I have spoken with Secretaries Vilsack and Jewell about the need for a comprehensive discussion about wildland fire budgeting with the office of management and budget.

Finally, the committee is looking forward to a rigorous

discussion on actions that can be taken to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires, to get the airtankers needed to fight these fires mobilized and to ensure that enough funding is provided to fight fires without sacrificing agencies' other critical missions. I also want to welcome Mr. Doug Decker, the outstanding State Forester from my home state, and I look forward to his testimony and that of our other witnesses.