



UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI, *Chairman*

**Opening Statement
Oversight Hearing on Wildfire Management
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
August 3, 2017**

Good morning. The committee will come to order.

We are here today to look at wildfire: to examine our wildfire management programs; the collaboration that is required to reduce risks to firefighters, communities, and resources; and some of the emerging technologies that are changing the way that fires are managed.

We are now well into the 2017 fire season and it is certainly a very active one. My friend from Montana I think is going to share some of what is happening in his state this morning, and I think it is appropriate to recognize the heroic acts of the men and women who fight these fires throughout the season and to recognize the loss of a firefighter in Montana.

[Sen. Daines speaks]

Well know that our hearts and our prayers are with the families, but again this speaks to the realities that we face with our wildland fires and our fires around the country – that this is dangerous and unpredictable work. And again, our thoughts and our prayers are with those who are serving.

As of August 1st, nearly 39,000 fires have burned almost 5.5 million acres of land. For comparison's sake, that's an area nearly the size of New Hampshire.

In Alaska, we have had a low fire year this year, we've had more than 300 fires burning about 630,000 acres. That's a lot of land, but it's below normal, so we're certainly not complaining. Just two years ago, in 2015, over five million acres burned in Alaska alone; and Mr. Maisch, being from the state of Alaska certainly knows and understands this all too well. Nationally, 2015 was one of the worst seasons on record, stretching nearly all year and burning over 10 million acres in total.

This Committee has spent a lot of time, a lot of good work, working on legislation to address the consequences of wildfire and we will continue that work until we arrive at legislative solutions—hopefully sooner than later.

What we really need is a comprehensive solution that addresses both wildfire budgeting and forest management.

We need to tackle both of those, at once, because we know the wildfire problem is not just a budgeting problem—it's also a management problem.

Last year, Ranking Member Cantwell along with Senator Wyden, Senator Risch and Senator Crapo, joined me in putting forward a comprehensive solution to address both challenges, we called this the “Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act.”

Our proposal included a fiscally responsible fix to permanently end the destructive practice of fire borrowing. We required Congress to provide resources to the agencies up front – enough to cover 100 percent of the average annual cost of firefighting over the previous ten years – while allowing for a limited cap adjustment when we experience those truly catastrophic years.

Our proposal took steps to address the hurdles that stand in the way of implementing the fuel treatments needed to mitigate wildfire risk, increase firefighter safety, and make our forests healthy and resilient.

We would have increased the use of technologies, such as drones, GPS trackers, and fire risk mapping. And made needed investments in community wildfire protection plans as well as “Firewise programs.”

We know that our wildfire strategy needs to include all of these important pieces of the wildfire management puzzle – and we know that other members on our committee also have good ideas that deserve to be considered.

While our hearing today is focused on oversight of wildfire management programs and the use of technologies, our goal is a good bill that will fix these problems and so the President will be able to sign this into law. We came up a little bit short in the last Congress, but as we will hear today, fires again continuing to destroy our lands—there is a lot more that we could do, there is a lot more that we must do from budgeting to new technologies to better management practices, to save them.

Again I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today, and particularly extend my appreciation Chris Maisch, Alaska’s State Forester.

And with that I will turn to Ranking Member Cantwell for your opening remarks.

###