

Opening Statement for ENR Hearing
Wildland Fire Preparedness/Forest Service Budget
Tuesday, July 15, 2014

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. Let me welcome you all to our Energy and Natural Resource hearing on wildlife fire preparedness and the Forest Service budget request. Let me welcome Senators Feinstein, McCain, and Crapo. I want to thank all of these Senators for their leadership on this issue that is so important for so many members of this committee and our nation. I also want to thank our witnesses who will follow this distinguished panel for their knowledge and insight. Today, we will explore the Forest Service and the Department of Interior's preparedness for the 2014 wildfire season, and to consider the President's Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Proposal for the Forest Service. Many of our colleagues have sent letters calling for action and today's hearing is a good opportunity to examine issues related to fire

suppression and attempt to glean a deeper understanding of the extent of the problem and possible solutions.

WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS

Fighting wildfires and funding fire suppression efforts have been important issues in American politics for over 100 years. For a brief historical context, it was interesting to find, in 1886 Yellowstone's civilian Superintendents abandoned their posts over a dispute in pay while three large wildfires raged and threatened the Park. The country turned to the fighting men of the US First Cavalry under the command of Captain Moses Harris to meet the challenge. Although his men lacked the necessary training to fight wildfires, Captain Harris led a successful effort to extinguish the fires and established the first common sense anti-wildfire rules in our nation's parks. In many ways, his unit became America's first professional wildfire fighters.

Today, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are responsible for funding and executing our fire prevention efforts.

The wildfire season, particularly in the West, is becoming longer and the fires more intense. In 2013, for example, as I'm sure Sen. Feinstein will point out, the Rim Fire in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, the third-largest in the State's history, burned 257,000 acres, for people in Louisiana that is almost the same size as the entire area just slightly larger than the entire City of New Orleans. And most tragically, the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona claimed the lives of 19 City of Prescott firefighters, members of the elite Granite Mountain Hotshots.

In Louisiana, we understand the devastating impact of natural disasters better than most, unfortunately. We also understand

that these catastrophic events are happening more frequently, that they are becoming more intense, and that the cost to clean up and recover from them goes up every year. Our wildfire suppression and prevention strategy must adapt to meet this new reality. We also must understand that smart prevention and a well-resourced and timely response can make all the difference.

Escalating Costs and Fire Borrowing

The exponential growth in the cost of fighting larger and more intense fires has put a real strain on the budget of the Forest Service in particular. In 1991, the Forest Service spent 13 percent of its overall budget on wildfire management, but today that number is over 40 percent. In 1985, the average annual fire suppression costs for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior was roughly \$630 million in 2013 dollars, but last year that number has more than doubled to \$1.7 billion.

The Forest Service also has exceeded the amount of money appropriated for fire suppression in eight of the last 10 years, requiring it to transfer funds from other projects – often referred to as “fire borrowing” – to cover emergency costs. Just last week we learned from the Administration that the Forest Service will need an additional \$615 million dollars to help fight fires this year – which is early 50 percent of its initial fire suppression budget.

Fire borrowing places a tremendous burden on a number of important Forest Service priorities, and the practice does not stop at the “Middle Divide.” Eastern and Southern states feel the impact of the shuffling of funding. In Louisiana for example, over \$130,000 dollars in projects for wildlife management on almost 2,000 acres on the exquisite Kisatchie National Forest were

canceled in 2013 because those resources were diverted to fight fires. In 2013, a 1,200 acre timber sale on the Kisatchie National Forest to improve wildlife habitat by thinning overstocked pine trees was delayed because resources were diverted to fight fires, costing jobs in our state.

This happens in many other states, when fire borrowing occurs. So, we need a solution. We need a long-term, cost-effective solution to adequately fund fire suppression to avoid having to make painful cuts to essential programs elsewhere.

LEGISLATIVE OPTIONS

Senators Wyden and Crapo, along with 13 of our colleagues including Senators Risch, Udall, Heinrich, Feinstein and Baldwin, have introduced the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act that would categorize mega fires as a natural disaster – and fund their suppression under the disaster cap. It takes the whole nation, in

my opinion, including many agencies with the proper resources and skills to effectively respond to and recover from natural disasters, and this bill would categorize mega fires the same way we do hurricanes and floods. A natural disaster is not the time to play politics with recovery money. People want us to send aid, not delay while we look for offsets.

Currently, one percent of fires account for nearly 30 percent of total suppression budgets. Funding these efforts under the disaster cap, would lessen the budgetary pressure on the Forest Service and free its budget to address its full range of important priorities.

Because this legislation would calculate the costs related to fire suppression in the 10-year rolling average that sets the disaster cap adjustment amount each year, and ensures that fire

suppression costs do not impede funds available for FEMA in the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF).

This legislation enjoys the support of a broad coalition of senators on both sides of the aisle, the Administration, and over 200 organizations such as the National Rifle Association, the Louisiana Forestry Association, and the Sierra Club. This is a great example of bicameral and bipartisan legislation, and I applaud Senators Wyden and Crapo for their efforts in this regard.

CLOSING

We should also look at how fire prevention programs can reduce the impact of dangerous wildfires across the country. As I've mentioned Kisatchie, I want to mention it just one more time, I was with the head of the Forest Service in the Kisatchie National

Forest, that crosses seven parishes across Louisiana. On that tour, which was extremely enlightening, I learned that the Forest Service, when it purposefully burns lands, it can significantly reduce the wildfires that rage out of control and keep good timber for cutting and keep people protected. And I'm looking forward to hearing more about that today. I was particularly happy to have that personal tour just a few weeks ago. So, let me turn to my ranking member and thank her for her cooperation and advice on all of these subjects. Senator Murkowski, thank you for joining us this morning.