

**Testimony of John “Chris” Maisch, Alaska State Forester
On Behalf of the Alaska Division of Forestry and
The National Association of State Foresters**

**Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Field Hearing Kenai Alaska**

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Good morning, Ms. Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee. My name is Chris Maisch, State Forester and Director of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry (DOF) and past President of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF). I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as the Committee entertains a review of the complex issues surrounding wildland fire management and the impacts to outdoor recreation opportunities during an active fire season. I also plan to offer some comments on the draft “Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016” that was recently made available for comment.

The mission of the DOF is to “proudly serve Alaskans through forest management and wildland fire protection.” The division is the lead agency for wildland fire management services on 150 million acres of land, with a primary goal to protect life and property. In addition, the organization oversees the management of 47 million acres of forests on state land, including approximately 2 million acres in three designated state forests. The Division also regulates commercial forestry practices on private, municipal and state lands with a mandate of protecting fish habitat and water quality during timber management activities.

The NASF represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all 50 states, eight territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters deliver technical and financial assistance, along with protection of forest health, water and wildfire for more than two-thirds of the nation’s forests. The mission and duties of state agencies vary significantly from state to state; however most have statutory responsibilities to provide wildland fire protection for state and private lands.

In fiscal year (FY) 2015, state forestry agencies provided this service on approximately 1.5 billion acres and helped train nearly 149,458 firefighters via funding from the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service), State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) State and Private Forestry programs. State Foresters work closely with federal partners to deliver forestry programs and wildfire protection services.

2015 Fire Season in Alaska and Impacts on Recreation/Tourism

As you know, the 2015 fire season was a difficult one in both the nation and in Alaska. Over 10 million acres burned nationally with about 5.1 million acres burning in Alaska, our second worst season on record. Four of Alaska’s top ten seasons for acres burned have occurred over the past twelve years. The Card Street fire began on the Kenai Peninsula in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge near the community of Sterling on June 15, on a day that had red flag warnings posted.

Three primary residents and eight outbuildings were lost and the fire burned 8,876 acres before containment was achieved. This fire impacted many of the specific items this hearing was designed to explore including: tourism on public land, outdoor recreation activities- especially fishing opportunities during June, and long-term impacts on wildlife habitat, hunting, trapping and other subsistence activities. At Skilak Lake, boat launch ramps and campgrounds were closed at the height of the tourist season, while numerous local residents were prevented from enjoying the various recreational and sport fishing opportunities that all Alaskans enjoy during our brief summer season. The Kenai River is a world renowned sport fishery and visitors and residents travel to this region to enjoy the various opportunities that can be found, provided there is not a large wildland fire creating havoc with their plans. How can we collectively do a better job of getting in front of this persistent wildland fire issue to minimize the negative impacts and risks to public safety, while at the same time recognizing the role wildland fire plays in this ecosystem? Let me outline the multi-step process utilized on the Kenai to address these issues, it all begins with advanced work and planning.

- The Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan is the state level, foundational document that establishes initial attack response at four different levels (Critical, Full, Modified and Limited) and provides high level strategic policy direction to fire managers across all land ownerships. It recognizes the need for close pre-fire incident cooperation and communication with landowners, communities, land management agencies and the fire suppression organizations to be well prepared for wildland fire events.
http://fire.ak.blm.gov/content/planning/aiwfmp_2010.pdf
- After the large spruce bark beetle outbreaks across the Kenai in the late 80's and early 90's, the concept of "All Hands, All Lands" came into practice to address the issues associated with the unprecedented acreage of dead forests and the changing wildland fire risk and a new fuel type- grass. This concept preceded the now well accepted goals enumerated in the Cohesive Strategy which has three primary objectives:
 - Restore and Maintain Resilient Landscapes
 - Develop Fire Adapted Communities
 - Provide Efficient and Effective Response to Wildfires
- Communities across the Kenai Peninsula undertook efforts to complete Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) and to implement specific recommendations for risk reduction in their communities and neighborhoods. Measures undertaken include:
 - Adoption of Firewise principals to decrease wildland fire risk to individual homes and businesses.
 - Increased training with cooperators including Mutual Aid Agreements, establishment of agency crews and other measures to increase capacity.
 - Aggressive fuels mitigation projects at key locations identified by CWPPs and agency land managers. The Funny River fire of 2004 on the outskirts of Soldotna is a good example of how landscape scale fuelbreaks can greatly assist suppression agencies in protecting vales at risk. (For a detailed report on this project see the attached link: https://www.fws.gov/alaska/nwr/visitor/fire/pdfs/FunnyRiverFuelTreatmentAssessment_FINAL.pdf).

- State Forest Action Plans (FAPs) that were requirement in the 2008 Farm Bill which are comprehensive documents that address state priorities across the suite of State & Private Forestry program areas. The FAPs establish state priorities and are key documents in the competitive funding allocations for federal fuel mitigation funding, particularly in the western states.

These actions taken in concert with each other build a resilient and adaptive approach to reduce risk and deal with large wildfire events in and near communities. While we always want to prevent a fire from impacting the wildland urban interface (WUI), these events happen all too frequently around the nation and to our northern neighbor, Canada. The boreal forest extends across a wide swath of North America and similar problems are shared with our friends and colleagues across the border. Impacts to local economies that depend on tourism, hunting and fishing and other recreational activities can be minimized by taking a proactive approach to the wildfire problem. Many types of wildlife respond positively to wildland fire after the initial event because of the improvements in habitat, especially for moose and other species that utilize a mosaic of habitat types. Fire in the right place, at the right time, is an important tool for wildlife managers, but communities must be assured that they are well protected from fires that are being managed to improve wildlife habitat and reduce future fire risk.

Recommendations

Specific suggestions for the committee's consideration to improve or augment the activities I've mentioned include:

- A simplified or streamlined process to allow federal agencies to act promptly to changing environmental conditions and funding opportunities to complete fuel mitigation projects on federal lands. A local case in point and not a criticism of our local USFWS Refuge Unit, they did everything within their authority to assist and make the Funny River landscape fuel break project a success. However, due to the overly complicated and time consuming process of completing NEPA documents for treating federal lands, the project was completed on Borough and Native Corporation lands just outside the wildlife refuge boundaries. While a categorical exclusion is a good tool to help address this situation, further reforms on size of treatments and process need your consideration. We know that landscape scale treatments are needed, why restrict our process tools to postage stamp treatments? Agencies need to clear large areas under a landscape scale process and tier numerous on the ground treatments from this one NEPA document. This will save funding that goes into numerous NEPA analysis efforts and can put more dollars on the ground where treatments are needed.
- Funding for the various elements of the cohesive strategy are critical, particularly for State Fire Assistance, Volunteer Fire Assistance and Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) in the State& Private Forestry budget line items. These first two line items help build capacity and provide wildland fire training nationwide where state agencies collectively trained 149,458 firefighters in 2015 as reported in NFPORS. Building and maintaining

capacity is a key need by many states, as our fire programs as a whole are finding it more difficult to recruit and retain both experienced frontline fire managers and initial attack firefighters. Funding for agency crews and training is critical to building a recruitment and advancement “pipeline” for new wildland firefighters.

- There is still a continued need to encourage the federal wildland fire agencies (Forest Service and Office of Aircraft Services) to effectively engage state forestry agencies via the NASF Fire Committee as equal partners. Our common goal is to update and clarify language in MOUs, concerning cooperator standards and mobilization guides to facilitate continued interagency use of state aircraft with an efficient and consistently implemented cooperative approval process. Despite recent efforts by the three main parties to draft a leadership intent letter, there remains reluctance by the federal agencies to fully recognize state agencies needs and suggested improvements in the aircraft and pilot “carding” process.
- Assist with the resolution of the cost reimbursement issue for the State of Alaska with wildland fires on military lands (primarily Air Force). Currently the state is not able to fully recover all costs associated with a response on military lands and must use a cumbersome process administered by the Department of Homeland Security that is inconsistently applied and overly time consuming (briefing paper available upon request).
- Support the concept of “flexible” funding in the State & Private Forestry Landscape Scale Restoration budget line item. Currently competitive projects are funded via this line item, which has been an effective way to address national and state priorities. Under the flexible funding concept, this process would still continue, but a certain percentage of funding would go directly to a state and be allocated by the state forester for priority projects enumerated in their state action plan. This would accomplish at least two key points: provide for additional efficiency in funding allocation and ensure that all states benefit from LSR projects, while allowing the state forester to address their state’s most critical needs. In many states this will likely be a wildland fire issue concerning fuels mitigation, but could also include responses to invasive insects when rapid detection and early response are keys to control of new pest threats.
- Provide funding for communities at risk to complete projects that will reduce risk and better prepare communities to survive and respond to wildland fires. Prevention, prevention, prevention- the more we collectively do to prepare for an incident, the better we will respond, including less overall cost and improved recovery timelines.

Proactive Forest Management and Cost of Wildland Fire Suppression

While not an initial focus for this hearing, a discussion draft was recently introduced by a bipartisan group of congressional members that addresses wildland fire budgeting, wildland fire response and reforms in forest management processes, which will lead to increase active management of federal lands. While both the State of Alaska and the NASF will provide additional written comments, I’ll offer a few points for consideration.

As this Committee is well aware, the Forest Service once again exhausted its available fire suppression funds to fight wildfires and was forced to transfer \$700 million in fiscal year (FY) 2015 from non-fire programs to pay for suppression needs. This interferes with ongoing work in the field and delays or completely stops new contracts for all types of activities including those that contribute to reduced wildfire risk across forested landscapes. This is the eighth time since 2002 that the Forest Service has needed to invoke its transfer authority to pay for shortfalls in fire suppression needs. In total, the agency spent \$1.7 billion on fire suppression in FY 2015.

- An Alaska example of how fire transfers affect other program areas can be found on the Tongass National Forest, where a stream restoration project for Sockeye and Chinook salmon habitat was planned for 2015. A local partner organization, Sitka Conservation Society had to cancel this project in June, just prior to its start, due to lack of funding. While this is just one example, there are many similar stories from jurisdictions throughout the country.

Fire transfers represent just one part of the broader wildfire funding problem. In recent years, the portion of the Forest Service budget allocated to fire programs has grown while the overall budget for the agency has remained relatively flat. As more funding is allocated to fight fires, less is allocated to other areas of the Forest Service budget. Suppressing fires is becoming more expensive and complex as a result of prolonged drought, lack of active forest management, and more people moving into Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas.

The discussion draft would allow access through a budget cap adjustment for additional funding to fight wildfires once all appropriated suppression funding (100 percent of the 10-year average) is exhausted. While we greatly appreciate the effort put into the current draft to recognize the need to address fire borrowing, the approach in the draft does not entirely solve the problem. As the 10-year average continues to grow with extreme wildfire seasons, the portion of the Forest Service's budget dedicated to fire grows. This results in less funding for other agency programs critical to supporting federal, state, and private forests and, further, decreases the ability to improve forest health conditions that reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

- Fire costs accounted for 16 percent of the Forest Service's total budget in FY 1995 and have grown to over 50 percent in FY 2015. Fire costs are projected to grow to 67 percent by FY 2025. *Forest Service Report "Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations"*

Our previous comments on this topic have been less focused on the funding 'mechanism' to which disaster funds are made available to the USFS and DOI, and instead stresses the critical need to access disaster funding to pay for catastrophic (large, costly, extreme) wildfires - placing these fires on par with other natural disasters. This could be via a budget cap adjustment or a sub-account in the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund.

The suggested efforts at streamlining the NEPA analysis for priority projects that address wildland fire issues to a limited set of alternatives, perhaps a no action and the recommended

action are good suggestions and will streamline the process saving both time and funding for planning staff, since additional alternatives should not be required.

Requiring agencies to work with states on an equal footing to certify aviation assets and pilots ahead of the fire season is a positive step in streamlining operations and ensuring there are no delays during the fire season for needed resources.

There are many other specific provisions in the draft bill that would help address the issues raised in today's testimony and at previous hearings and we individually and jointly look forward to commenting in detail on the proposals put forward. Funding, advanced preparations, fuel treatments and building capacity to respond are all key parts of the overall strategy and this discussion draft is an excellent effort toward supporting and addressing these topics.

Conclusion

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee on behalf of the Alaska Division of Forestry and the National Association of State Foresters. Wildland fire management and response is one of the most challenging facets of our jobs, and our two organizations will continue to assist the Committee in finding ways to address the challenges we all face. Finally, I would like to thank the Committee for its continued leadership and support of efforts to both respond to wildland fire and to take the necessary actions to address the underlying causes through increasing active management of all forestlands.