



**Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on Wildfire Management
May 5, 2015**

“Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks for calling this important hearing. And I, too, want to thank the witnesses for joining us today. Fire season is upon us. And we are looking to you as experts to tell us how we can better prepare for this year’s fire season.

“For some time now, this committee has heard—time and again—that our fires are getting noticeably worse. Extreme weather conditions, the amount of hazardous fuel in our forests, suboptimal management schemes and increasing development in the Wildland-Urban Interface are combining to produce more lethal fires.

“So the people in my state are all too familiar with this and want to know what we can do to better prepare.

“Throughout the country we saw fires, but I think the state of Washington was the most hard-hit. I see that Chief Tidwell is nodding his head. More than twice the average number of acres burned across the Northwest.

“Last July, Washington suffered the Carlton Complex fire. My staff and I spent lots of time talking to people in affected communities. This fire alone burned 149,000 acres in a single day. It burned an average of 5 acres per second, for 24 hours straight. So as a result of the combination of extreme weather with this fire, 353 homes were lost.

“Despite many efforts for people to coordinate, the people in those towns lacked power and communications for weeks. Because of downed telephone lines, homeowners were not able to call each other and to warn of the encroaching fires. Instead, police had to drive around from town-to-town, calling for evacuations from their vehicles, using megaphones.

“So one thing I will be calling for is better coordination between the Forest Service and FEMA on communication responses during these natural disasters. If they are becoming worse, we need better memoranda of understanding that require communications be set up right away so that our communities can continue to deal with these disasters.

“I know that we can get ahead of these issues. And as the chair mentioned, we need more hazardous fuels reduction in the Wildland-Urban Interface, and we need to figure out how to use the resulting biomass to offset these costs. I know we are going to hear some testimony on that today and I look forward to it.

“I am also eager to hear from the witnesses on the need for more prescribed burns. Also, we need fresh ideas on how to fund the Forest Service’s efforts to protect our communities. Senator Wyden has introduced legislation on this and I am happy to be a co-sponsor.

“The science is clearly telling us that wildfires are not behaving the same way they have for the past several decades. The witnesses will talk more about why this is, but I want to make sure that we discuss today what our response is going to be to this evolving problem.

“Researchers from the Forest Service just last week published a major, scientific report. The report made it clear that if we are ever going to get ahead of the problem, the Forest Service needs to respond to wildfires in a fundamentally different way.

“To quote the report: ‘Our modern wildfire problems derive from a self-reinforcing cycle of counter-effective actions.’

“We cannot keep using the same, tired approaches that we have for the last 100 years. We need to make sure that we are focusing on getting different results. Common sense tells us that our response needs be modified now that the problem is different.

“The Forest Service report does a great job summing up what the Forest Service needs to do. The report says that altering the current trajectory will require a total system transformation. The report bluntly states that maintaining the status quo will actually increase wildfires, increase the losses we suffer from wildfires and significantly affect the Forest Service’s ability to meet its core mission.

“So we need new solutions.

“I am certainly going to work with the chair and my colleagues here on the committee over the next few months to find some of those solutions. I see four areas ripe for us to work on.

“First, we need to do what we can to reduce the probability of catastrophic fires. We need to see at least double the amount of hazardous fuels treatments and double the amount of prescribed burn.

“Second, we need to fight large wildfires, which have become very expensive. Since 2000, the federal government has spent nearly \$24 billion just fighting the large wildfires. We need to ensure that federal agencies have the money necessary to protect our communities. And we need to treat large wildfires differently in our budget.

“Third, spending during these fires needs to be given a hard look to ensure accountability. We’ve seen questions about spending practices in the media and we need to make sure we are incentivizing the right kinds of cost-savings in the budget.

“And finally, but most importantly, the assistance that communities receive after a wildfire has started needs to be different. The assistance needs to show up more quickly, and the assistance needs to be tailored to the issues these fires are now raising. The federal government is responding to a new type of disaster where these events are blowing up in greater degree and reaching communities at an unbelievable lightning speed. So we need a more proactive, upfront coordination with our federal agencies. The Forest Service and FEMA, for example, need to be communicating with each other in real-time and making sure that the resources are actually on the ground.

“The fire season forecast came out last week, and it is particularly troubling for our state. I hope people are ready to help and I hope FEMA will work to stage things, like generators and assistance equipment, so they will be closer to these areas and can respond more quickly.

“So again, Madam Chair, thank you so much for this hearing. I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses and to working with our committee to try to institute some new approaches.”

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