

**Statement of Dr. Peter Goldmark
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Washington State Department of Natural Resources**

**Field Hearing on Wildland Fire Response
Submitted to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate
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Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as part of this important conversation about leading our nation's wildland fire response toward meeting the challenges we face during this, the worst fire season in Washington State history. I especially appreciate Senator Cantwell's leadership as ranking member of the Committee on such a critical and timely subject.

My name is Peter Goldmark, Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands. I am the elected leader of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR), an agency charged with wildland fire protection across more than 12 million acres of forest and rangeland in our state. DNR's perspective on wildfire response is not only one of a wildland fire agency, but as an interagency partner with local, state and federal entities, and as a land manager of 3 million acres of forest and agricultural land, among our many other duties.

I am a scientist by training and a Washington native, raised on my family's ranch in the Okanogan Highlands. As a volunteer wildland firefighter, I fought fires as a member of Okanogan County's Fire District No. 8 for more than 30 years. My primary education was in a one-room schoolhouse. After receiving a Ph.D. in molecular biology from the University of California at Berkeley, I traveled to Harvard University for a postdoctoral fellowship in neurobiology.

Leaders Must Rise to the Challenge of Today's Wildland Fire Environment

As we speak, the grave wildfire situation we are facing in eastern Washington confronts us as leaders with a stark reality: The wildland fire environment is unlike any we have ever faced before, and we must adapt. Wildfire seasons are longer; climatic and weather conditions are more extreme; wildfire behavior is explosive and unpredictable; megafires are no longer the exception, but increasingly becoming the norm. The human and community toll of these fires is heart wrenching. The demands on local, state and federal governments for wildfire response and disaster relief are ever-increasing and we must rise to the challenge. We can only do this together, in the same way our local, state and federal firefighters are standing beside one another on the fire lines right now.

A Federal Disaster Funding Structure for Wildfires is Imperative

A federal wildfire funding structure that acknowledges the need to treat megafires as what they really are – disasters, not routine agency business – has been under discussion for a number of years. DNR, state forestry agencies across the country, and a 236-member coalition of

organizations have advocated for Congress to enact a funding system that no longer pits investments in land management, community protection and preventive fire hazard reduction against essential emergency response functions. As detailed in a recent report, *The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations: Effects on the Forest Service's Non-fire Work*¹, the Forest Service projects that in just 10 years, two out of every three dollars appropriated from Congress as part of its discretionary budget will be spent on fire programs.

Just yesterday, the Forest Service issued direction to its field units beginning the transfer of \$250 million from non-fire accounts to cover the suppression over-spending incurred from this year's extreme firestorm. A second transfer of an additional \$200 million is also planned as expenditures accrue. Among the sources of funding are State & Private Forestry in the amount of \$30 million. One of our most important wildfire prevention measures are State & Private Forestry-funded grants to communities for conducting hazard reduction, FireWise and preparedness planning activities. The current system not only cripples the Forest Service's capacity to achieve sufficient hazard reduction and prevention actions, but adds insult to injury by directly cannibalizing programs that promote healthy forests and wildfire prevention.

If nothing more is accomplished by wildfire response legislation in Congress, we must fix the structural funding problems that stand in the way of our success. Moreover, we must seize upon this opportunity to turn the existing perverse set of budget incentives on its head and harness it in the service of life-, property-, and money-saving prevention and hazard mitigation investments. If we can set the trigger point for initiating disaster-sourced funding back from the standard budget mechanism – the 10-year average of suppression costs – and reinvest the savings in fire prevention and fuels reduction we will begin to see meaningful change.

Prevention and Mitigation Investments Must Create Lasting Change

Washington and many other states are showing leadership to make increasing investments in wildfire hazard reduction. In January I requested \$20 million over two years from the state legislature to address forest health and fire hazards. Although they appropriated only \$10 million, this still represents the single largest investment the state has ever made. DNR is committed, as are our federal counterparts, to approaching wildfire hazards at a landscape-scale. None of this year's destructive wildfires have affected or threatened exclusively one jurisdiction, and therefore our efforts to reduce hazards to communities and forests must be aligned across boundaries.

There are an estimated 2.7 million acres² of high-risk forest conditions in eastern Washington alone, which is about one-third of the total forest landscape. Washington State has 158 identified communities at risk of wildfire, most within a stone's throw of these overstressed, overgrown forests. This is made more poignant because we are seeing wildfires that move dozens of miles in a single burning period. The 2014 Carlton Complex wildfire, for example, grew by 123,000 acres as it made a near 30-mile run in 9 hours' time. Wind-driven embers from the 2015 Sleepy Hollow Fire ignited and burned down fruit processing warehouses, otherwise surrounded by pavement, along the banks of the Columbia River in downtown Wenatchee. These fires tell us as

¹ <http://www.fs.fed.us/about-agency/budget-performance/cost-fire-operations>

² <http://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0378112714005519>

leaders that we must think bigger, and this will require investments that are strategically sound, but also larger in magnitude than those of the past.

In Washington State we have seen firsthand the successes of fuels reduction work around communities and in the forest landscape. Again drawing upon the 2014 Carlton Complex, we experienced the terrible losses of more than 300 homes. However, within the fire's footprint there had been hazard reduction work performed around 67 structures, 59 of which were saved. So another way of saying that is, the structure losses in Carlton would have been 20 percent worse without these investments. We cannot solve this problem overnight. Whether today's megafires continue to pose such grave risks to people and firefighters, however, is an outcome we must change.

One critical point of discussion in Washington State and nationally about hazard reduction has been: How much is enough? I submit that this is entirely the wrong question. The right question is: How do we build the infrastructure, community leadership and public-private investment to sustain a long-term effort? In situations like these, I believe the public sector must lead-off with a pulse of investment in our forests, landscapes and communities. This brings capital to the table and demonstrates to citizens and prospective business partners that our commitment is not simply a flash in the pan. We may always need to use public funds in some proportion to support activities like community planning, fuels reduction and FireWise, but I think we are underestimating the ethic of self-determination and ingenuity of people in communities that are under threat.

Fortunately for us, this has been underway full-force in Washington State. We are second in the nation in the number of FireWise communities. We are the site of some exemplary and leading edge work in Fire Adapted Communities and the Fire Learning Network. We have strong and growing collaborative groups – several recognized under the national Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration program – working on National Forest management in eastern Washington. These are the kinds of investments by people and community leaders that can carry the day. However, it has been elusive to achieve the pace and scale of outcomes that collaborators and agency managers have identified as needed. This is primarily a function of funding resource scarcity that is caused by not only the current dynamic in the national funding structure, but the corrosive cumulative impacts it has had on agency capacity over the many years it has been in place.

We can, and must, align forest restoration and community protection objectives with economic benefits. We can, and must, make significantly greater investments alongside the people who are leading the charge on-the-ground for broader, faster outcomes. We can, and must, engage and lead people toward rallying around a new way of looking at life in a fire-prone landscape. These are the actions that will create lasting change.

Wildfire Response Infrastructure to Meet Today's Challenges

One of the most basic functions of government is to provide for public safety, health and security. There are diverse roles and missions for the array of agencies involved in wildfire response, but this basic public safety function unites us all. In the face of Washington's

megafires I have found this tenet of safety etched on the soot-stained faces of our heroic firefighters and written in the tears of people who have lost so much. For this reason, we must continue strengthening the bonds between respective local, state and national entities within the wildland fire community. Together, we must extend those bonds to achieve better partnerships with the people we serve. We must adapt our response framework, equipment, training and technology to today's fire environment – most importantly, to enable quicker, better-informed responses to wildfire starts in pre-identified high risk areas that threaten communities. Finally, we must redouble our commitment to safety.

No entity can afford to work alone in today's fire environment. In Washington State, our wildland firefighting response infrastructure is as integrated as anywhere else I have seen. This enables us, for example, to marshal structure protection resources, National Guard and active military resources, state resources, federal resources, tribal resources, private contractors, and virtually any other resource that is trained and capable onto a single incident. We need, however, to continue strengthening our early detection, fast response, and preparation for responding to fast-growing and unpredictable wildfires that call all hands into service over extremely short time periods.

The current capacity to achieve this outcome is resource limited from a number of perspectives. First, there are few dedicated resources to grow the capacity of local fire districts and emergency managers, including staffing, equipment and training. Often districts are first on-scene since they have the closest available resources, which is critical for successful initial attack. Second, while we have engaged large deployments of National Guard and military assets in Washington State this season, there is a significant opportunity to grow the wildfire knowledge base on an ongoing basis so that the call-up process is both rapid and effective. Finally, we have seen an outpouring of both commercial and volunteer support to engage in the wildfire effort. People want to help. Currently these efforts must be stood-up in place, amid the critical business of managing the fire. A greater commitment to safe and effective on-demand resource utilization mechanisms would help create in situ operational surge capacity, as well as strengthening bonds with affected communities. In keeping with a focus on fire prevention, however, capacity for rapid response while fires are still small must be the priority.

Technological advances have sometimes had difficulty penetrating the wildland fire environment, often due simply to their expense. Modern communications, personal GPS transponders, reliable field internet access, smartphone-based technologies, real-time weather data availability in the field, accurate fire weather forecasting and fire behavior models, forward-looking infrared (FLIR) imaging to penetrate smoke, and continuing to improve fire shelters are only a few examples.

Modernizing the large airtanker fleet is another example of the need to adapt our equipment to today's conditions. This year, the Forest Service planned to have up to 21 airtankers available for operations including: six legacy airtankers, 14 next generation tankers, and one agency owned/contractor operated HC-130H. The fleet size and capacity is still only one-half what it was a decade ago. Expediting the completion of a modernized the fleet is long overdue.

Finally, all elements of improved response and coordination must be done in the service of firefighter and public safety. Many of the foregoing priorities can help ensure fire conditions are communicated in real-time, that firefighter locations are tracked, and that fire supervisors have good situational awareness of what is happening.

Conclusion

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of DNR and the State of Washington. Wildland fire response is one of the most challenging facets of our jobs. DNR stands ready to assist the Committee in finding ways to address the challenges we all face in confronting today's extreme wildfire environment. Finally, I thank the Committee for its continued leadership and support on these critical issues.