

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Seattle Field Hearing on Federal Agency Wildfire Management August 27, 2015

“Thank you all for being here. I want to thank Sen. Barrasso, for flying over from Wyoming and being part of this field hearing of this Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee field hearing on wildfires. I want to note that you are chair of the public lands subcommittee.

“We are here today – we thought we would be here many months ago having a discussion about last year’s fire season. But then this fire season came up upon us.

“Before I begin my remarks, I, too, want to thank the over 3,000 men and women fighting fires throughout our state who have been fighting fires, working tirelessly around the clock, giving it all they can. Specifically, our prayers do go out to the families of Andrew Zajac, Richard Wheeler and Tom Zbyszewski. They made the ultimate sacrifice and they lost their lives trying to protect the very communities that they lived in. Our heart goes out to these families, friends and communities. And our hearts and prayers are still with those firefighters that are recovering. These men and women are doing everything they can to help make us safe. We wish them a speedy recovery.

These Fires Are Historic

“Unfortunately, it’s becoming all too real to the people of Washington that this year’s fire season is breaking records.

“This is day 77 of continuous fire operations – a record by more than 15 days. And we have many more days yet to come. As of yesterday, the perimeters of our wildfires in the Pacific Northwest totaled 1,658 miles—essentially a distance stretching from Seattle to Milwaukee—all in need of firelines. In total, more than 1,100 square miles of Washington state have burned this year—an area larger than the entire state of Rhode Island.

“The Okanogan Complex Fire has now surpassed last year’s Carlton Complex as the single largest wildfire in our state’s history. And clearly this is the worst fire season in our state’s history.

The Agencies Are Working to Protect You



“Despite that fact, people should be assured that firefighters – on the local, state, federal and even international levels – are answering the call. Their diligent work has managed to save many thousands of houses threatened across the state.

“The president did grant federal emergency aid, and operations are now being coordinated out of a mobilization center at Fairchild Air Force Base.

“But at the same time, we know it’s only August – that we could see fires burning for the next month or two. We know that this is beginning to feel like the new normal.

“In fact, as I was traveling around the state, I ran into a friend at a diner in Wilbur. She was telling me about she and her husband were planning their evacuation, only to realize that there were something things that they had never unpacked from last year’s evacuations.

New Challenges Require New Strategies

“So is this the new normal? We are definitely going to hear from our witnesses today in their testimonies to talk about what we face, what are these new challenges, and how do we deploy new strategies to best help our communities.

“I’ve been to central and eastern Washington, to many parts of our state, talking to individuals. And as I said, our legislation – which is really in response to last year’s fire season – is about upgrading our national fire management strategies and leveraging the hard lessons we’ve learned on the ground.

“We have heard the challenges of communities and first responders face trying to face challenging communications infrastructure. Last year in the Carlton Complex fire, many of the broadband communications throughout Twisp had burned up. How do these many individuals communicate to the towns and individuals through that process?

“We heard from our firefighters and experts on the front lines about the challenges of new fire behavior – and I’m sure our witnesses are going to talk about that today.

“We also held a number of roundtables and heard from people about the advanced fire season and what we can do in preparation. Several Washington communities, like Yakima County and Kittitas County, are implementing Community Wildfire Protection Plans. I know the commissioner is here today to talk about some of that.



“These plans work because people come together ahead of time. They determine the risks to that community from wildland fires, and they can reduce those risks.

“I also heard repeatedly that—when the time is right and the fire season is behind us—our communities are looking for federal leadership on hazardous fuel reduction treatments and other preventative measures that would help us better manage the landscape in the future.

New Strategies in the Bipartisan Bill

“So our focus right now in the state of Washington should be—first and foremost—making sure that we are helping to protect our communities, and get the current situation under control to ensure our safety of our communities and firefighters. But when our time is right, we want to work in the other Washington, on a bipartisan basis, to take the ideas that we learn and put into legislation, and get that legislation passed before next fire season, so that next year, we are better prepared.

“Our key steps in the legislation are to:

- (1) bolster community preparedness, prevention and resilience;
- (2) update our emergency response capabilities so communities can best communicate and
- (3) taking action to reduce hazardous fuels as a means of managing risk.

“One issue I just want to highlight is the need to solve what is called ‘the fire borrowing problem.’ If we provide adequate funding for fighting fires at the beginning of the year, we also need to make sure money is not being stolen from fire prevention programs each summer. According to the Forest Service, every dollar spent on prevention saves \$1.70 on firefighting. Since 2002, a total of \$3.2 billion has been ‘fire borrowed’ from other Forest Service programs to cover emergency firefighting costs. For the same amount of money, we could have a 50 percent increase in the air tanker fleet, or 2,000 more firefighters, or have treated hazardous fuels on a million more acres of land the Wildland-Urban Interface, where many of the homes are at risk.

“According to the Forest Service, these actions could save \$420 million in firefighting costs each year—in other words, they could have saved taxpayers \$5.4 billion in total.

“So we need a more strategic approach to investing in prevention—it will help pay for itself in the long-term.

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“Along those same lines, our legislation does:

- Encourage the federal and state agencies to do landscape treatments when the fire risks are low.
- Enhance mapping so we know the areas at the greatest risk from wildand fires.
- Upgrade our communications and technology so our firefighters have the best and most effective tools for fighting the fires.
- And ask FEMA to make sure to address the needs of our rural communities, and that density requirements don’t preclude from getting emergency assistance.

“I guarantee you that both my colleague and I who come from very beautiful states understand that our rural recreational economies are key values to our state. We want to see them protected.

“So we have been working on this bipartisan effort. And I’m sure that this fire season and today’s hearing will add additional thought to our efforts. But let me repeat again – it is our hope that we will take these lessons back to DC. Because the need is urgent to make these changes and get better prepared for next fire season.

“And again, I thank the witnesses for being here and I look forward to their testimony.”

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