

Statement by Gary Berndt Kittitas County, Washington Commissioner

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Good Morning Ranking Member Cantwell, Public Lands Subcommittee Chairman Barrasso and distinguished guests.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee today and I am very appreciative of your concerns for local communities devastated by ever increasing impacts of fire, and a vision of opportunities for a long term solution.

I am currently a County Commissioner in Kittitas County Washington which lies along Interstate 90 just East of the Seattle metropolitan area. I have recently retired from the Washington State Department of Natural Resources where I was a Regional Fire Manager responsible for state and private forest lands across many counties of eastern Washington. I was also involved in wildland incident management leading an interagency management team for fifteen years across several states of the intermountain west. I have also participated in the development and delivery of local and national training courses on incident management.

Kittitas County is approximately 75% publically owned lands with nearly half of that in U.S. Forest Service ownership and the remainder are state owned lands. The private industrial lands were basically dismantled several years ago and a significant amount of those lands are now in developer ownership and destined for residential subdivision. The single largest threat to our County is the potential for catastrophic wildfire and followed by burned lands washing away before restoration can begin. Our County is very much a fire adapted environment as are all the Counties of Eastern Washington. When fire returns, almost as a predictable cycle, to these areas there is now the complication of significant residential development in these fire prone areas. As an instance the fire "cycle" in the higher precipitation area of Snoqualmie Pass may be around 200 years, near Cle Elum where there is less precipitation the interval is closer to 100 years and near the Columbia River the fire return interval is less than 10 years historically.

All the Counties along the East slopes of the Cascade Mountains are similar in this fire return cycle.

As the population swells in the western portion of the state, there is a strong outward migration of people who seek a quieter and less crowded lifestyle. They are willing to either work at home or accept a longer commute for that improved lifestyle and sense of place. This has placed a significant number of new homes on lands previously considered industrial forest. These lands are commonly directly adjacent to federal USFS lands. This migration and lifestyle has made our County the fifth fastest growing county in Washington State.

Issues of Past Development Patterns

All of the Counties on the East slopes of the Cascade are prone to significant fire events that have no respect for ownership boundaries. Our County as well as many other fire adapted communities have adopted Community Wildfire Protection Plans. Kittitas County has actively supported and accomplished seven federally recognized Firewise Communities as well. These have been an educational and awareness campaign by local volunteer fire districts, the local conservation district, and the County Fire Marshal. The impact of five major fire incidents in the last four years has been a motivator for landowners to participate. There are many pre-existing developments from many years ago within the forested areas of western Kittitas County that are very vulnerable to a catastrophic fire. The access is often substandard for emergency responders, water supplies minimal at best, there are overhead power lines, and many development Covenants Codes, and Restrictions that do not allow vegetation to be removed without homeowners association approval. When these are combined onto steep slopes and exposed to prevailing winds there is serious concern for threat of fire.

Current County Actions

Kittitas County has adopted the Wildland Urban Interface Code for construction and development in the rural areas. The code was adopted in 2006 and recently updated with only some local modifications. The code within the County has a “risk” map that broadly categorizes areas into low, moderate and high risk for wildfire and the requirements of construction and defensible space are zone specific. All construction in rural areas is subject to the WUI codes for that particular zone. Defensible space must also be factored in. The County Fire Marshal believes that the defensible space is the most critical element to assisting a home to be prepared for the passage of a wildfire if no other suppression equipment is available. Depending on the hazard rating of the area involved, defensible space must be created and maintained from 30’ to 250’ beyond the new structure. Defensible space includes limbing trees up 10’ from the ground, removing deadfall, removing ladder fuels and working with the landscape to provide as many natural barriers as possible. There is encouragement to utilize landscaping vegetation that is fire resistant. The challenge for success with the WUI code is ensuring maintenance of the defensible space with a severely limited staff, Kittitas County has a Fire Marshal and a Deputy. There may be as many as 400 homes constructed under this code with now over 100 being added annually. Funding would be beneficial to ensure that the intent of code is met. Without the ability to re-visit homes many owners will not continue to maintain defensible space.

Kittitas County Roads standards also require dual ingress and egress for developments of forty lots or more. New roads are required to meet standards that will allow emergency response to safely enter and exit.

The County Conservation District continues to be very active with the Firewise program and is the subcontractor for the Hazard Mitigation Preparedness Grants through FEMA. The District has provided protection to nearly 270 properties per year since 2013 and has conducted multiple workshops for owners annually. The Conservation District currently averages 10 assessments

weekly. One project coordinated by the Conservation District is a “roving” chipper that is provided by a local Fire District that responds to landowners who are working to firewise and are in need of assistance to eliminate the residue. One opportunity for improvement to this program would be a consistent and reliable approach to grants that generate through all federal entities. Grants are difficult to manage when there are differing procedures.

The current extreme fire danger and lack of resources has generated very close partnerships and cooperation across all responders in the County including USFS, State, County Fire Marshal, and several fire protection district personnel. There is a routine conference call with discussion of staffing, response to new starts, and a strong prevention component that is agreed to unanimously. These relationships are a foundation to ensuring a rapid response while working to prevent any new fires.

Opportunities for Improvement

There is a great opportunity for Federal Agency professionals to coordinate with state agencies and assist local responders and County Fire Marshals to have the tools to plan and to have needed equipment. In our County there are 11 fire districts or small municipal departments that are almost exclusively volunteers who work from minimal budgets and commit untold hours of time away from family for the greater good of the community. Having fire professionals that provide facilitation and guidance can be a template for success in preparedness. Local fire districts are a key to rapid response.

There is a growing divide between local fire agencies and the federal and state systems with regard to fire leadership qualifications. Local volunteer Districts have a very limited ability to advance into the qualifications of mid level or top level incident management not because they lack the basic skills, but because there is a lack of funds and a challenge of time available for volunteers who have day jobs. A commitment from the federal agencies to accept “detail” assignments specifically for fire management similar to the Redmond IHC crew will begin to generate a reservoir of fire leadership at the local level of nearly every county in the west. This would be an investment for a long term successional plan that is currently lacking. Training and certification in the performance based environment is a key element in any fire program.

The need for public information throughout the fire season and especially during an incident is a challenge for all agencies at all levels. It is imperative that local agencies be involved in this process. Emergency managers, evacuation orders, updates on status, maps etc. are crucial to not only those impacted, but to extended families. Post fire communications on recovery and funding are key to providing information to allow 911 centers, public works, and law enforcement to accomplish daily duties without constant interruptions. Coordinating and training from agencies will be needed to standardize any approach.

Kittitas County is verging on becoming an area of non attainment for days of impaired air quality. The Health Department monitors and reports daily to the public on the level of

impairment. There has been a lot of concern about adding to this situation beyond wildland fires that are unavoidable. There is an opportunity to engage the community if prescribed burning is contemplated .

Following an incident there is a very short time for counties to prepare for the start of the potential flooding and earth and debris movement. This is a critical time for local government that is difficult to manage. There needs to be a similar system for post fire actions as there is for suppression. The BAER process that occurs on federal lands would be even more important on private ownerships that are at risk or public infrastructure that may also be at risk.

A Concern.

Kittitas County is home to the upper watersheds of the Yakima River which supplies the needs of cities but also is critical to the economies of Kittitas, Yakima, and Benton Counties. A catastrophic fire that affects this basin for decades into the future is a worst case scenario. It is imperative to take actions that ensure the watershed protection role for communities, fish, and farms is accomplished.

Kittitas County is a strong supporter of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan which relies on a healthy and resilient forest to ensure a consistent and clean water supply that will mitigate conditions of declining snowpack and drought unless there is a major fire. Ensuring the protection of the Upper Yakima River basin is key to water issues that affect the future of Kittitas County.

Management Actions.

I believe that status quo is unacceptable. The federal lands in my County and counties across Washington need solutions. There are immediate needs to support prevention, preparedness, response, and suppression. We need to treat burned area restoration as importantly as suppression. There is also a need for a long term and durable solution to make the inevitability of fire more manageable. My concern is that many of the actions I have discussed are reactive to symptoms of the current crisis and do not address the growing problem of fuel buildups across forest ownerships that continue to accumulate until there is the major fire event that alters the landscape for generations. There is an immediate need to better protect homes watersheds and community infrastructure from these catastrophes. Local economies tend to suffer the loss and also bear the costs.

National Forests have become too dense and the weakened trees are susceptible to insect and disease such as the current Spruce Budworm outbreak of the last 10 or so years in the Yakima River basin. The long term solution to reducing the threat of escalating fire must involve treatment of these weakened forests. Over my career the changes in fire severity and occurrence were dramatic and local communities are now involved as never before. Currently there are entire towns threatened by fire for the second year in a row.

The solution may be a combination of large scale prescribed burning, maintaining a strategic forest road system, utilizing new technology to designate rapid response areas, or adding additional air tankers, but the solution for the long term will also have to involve strategic timber harvest and stand thinning. Recently Nature Conservancy purchased nearly 50,000 acres of timberland in our county and they acknowledge that forest management will be critical to achieving their goals including reducing the threat from fire.

Incident management teams are much more successful and cost effective when there are options to guide fire into managed areas with access and reduced fuels.

I believe that there is a once in a lifetime opportunity to create solutions which will help prevent and drastically lessen the impact and numbers of fires we are enduring. A first step must be to establish a funding mechanism that does not “raid” funds for management activities to pay for suppression costs. Senator Cantwell has discussed this and without the funds to carry on routine management activities nothing will change.

Forest collaboratives such as North Central Washington and “Tapash” hold great promise for coordinating management activities across many ownerships on a large scale. This coordination should be required as it will prioritize critical treatment areas.

In sum, I am asking that you as our leaders who have chosen to make a difference across the west to continue to work together. I see communities across the west continue to be at peril from catastrophic fire impacts . I have managed fires where families have lost everything, I have worked my entire career to minimize the damage to forests watersheds and local economies. The solution is to better improve immediate response and management, but the real solution is to develop a plan of action that will create a fire resistant healthy forest environment .

Thank You for this opportunity to share my views and I offer my appreciation from my County, but also other National Forest Counties as you move forward with this critical work. I had the privilege of instructing fire management in Australia and worked with a psychologist who would remind me that “every complex problem has a simple solution.... And it is always wrong”. This a complex problem.