



Opening Statement
Hearing on the Forest Service's FY 2019 Budget Request
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
April 24, 2018

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

We're here this morning to consider the President's budget request for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2019. Before we begin, I'd like to welcome the Interim Chief of the Forest Service, Vicki Christiansen, back our committee. You were here last fall, when we were talking about the use of new technologies to mitigate wildfire risk, so good to have you back before us again.

We're here to discuss the upcoming fiscal year, but the best place to start is with a discussion of what we just did, in the FY 2018 omnibus. That bill included a deal on wildfire budgeting and forest management, and it's no secret that I was not thrilled with it.

Along with many members of the House and Senate, I supported both a budget fix for wildfire suppression and meaningful management reforms that would allow for more active forest management.

I think that we fell far short of the management reforms that I had hoped for, and that I think are needed, to reduce the threat of wildfires. There were some glimmers of progress—for example, on vegetation management. But until we do more on this front, we will fail to fully protect our forests, and continue to burn through a lot taxpayer dollars each fire season.

On a more positive note, the new wildfire suppression budgeting framework should end the destructive practice of fire borrowing and stabilize the operations budget by treating wildfires more like natural disasters. We've heard this throughout this committee for a long time, so I think it is important that we end that practice.

This is important, because for years the Forest Service has argued that fire borrowing and the rising cost of wildfire operations have inhibited its ability to carry out its multiple-use mission. Whether increasing the timber harvest or processing permits for recreation access, everything has been linked to fire costs. So now that we have a fix, I expect the Forest Service to step up and address management priorities that have long been neglected.

Throughout this year's budget request, the Forest Service acknowledges its multiple-use mission and primary responsibility of maintaining existing lands. So this morning I'd like to lay out my budget priorities for Alaska.

Ms. Christiansen, I travelled to southeast Alaska with your predecessor earlier this year, we had a conversation about that. We held a roundtable in Ketchikan and heard from over 20 leaders who represented local governments, Alaska Natives, tourism, energy, timber, and environmental groups. The resounding theme that we heard over and over again is that more access is needed in the Tongass.

Now in my mind, that starts with restoring the Roadless exemption on the Tongass. You have a state petition that asks you to do just that. As I have said many times before, the Roadless Rule just doesn't make sense in the Tongass, which is a forest made up of 32 island communities.

On this same trip, we also heard about the problems with our recently amended land plan. And even those who support a rapid transition from harvesting old growth to young growth acknowledge that the plan, as written, isn't going to result in a successful transition unless we make some changes.

I think, and we've had this conversation, that there are some real errors in that plan. It was completed without a comprehensive inventory of young growth. So I hope that you will implement the direction provided in the explanatory statement that accompanies the omnibus and seriously look at a plan amendment or revision.

Now, we've got other issues in Alaska. Our nation's second largest national forest – the Chugach – the agency effectively placed a moratorium on new permits for outfitters and guides for years now. One guide, he simply wanted to take his clients ice fishing, he was told that permits were not being issued and to check back in seven years. That is just absolutely unacceptable.

While the moratorium has now been lifted, which we appreciate, much of the Chugach is still closed off to outfitters and guides. We hear a lot of talk about keeping public lands accessible to the public, but sometimes in Alaska, it's a very different experience from the public's perspective. So we have to make sure that our heli-skiers, our cross-country skiers, our fishermen and women, that they have the access they need to the forest that is billed as a recreation forest. I'll note that Secretary Zinke signed two secretarial orders just this last week on recreation, designed to push agencies to increase and expand access to recreation. So hopefully this will cause a sharper focus on what we need to be doing in our national forests.

Of course, Alaska is not alone, and many who sit on this committee face similar issues in their states.

I think the Forest Service has an opportunity here. The agency has been given more funding, new tools, and expanded authorities. So we'll be looking to build on those in 2019. But in the meantime, don't squander this goodwill. Get going to correct the management failures that have plagued the agency for years.

End fire borrowing and revamp your budget process. Ensure that our forests are productive again. Move at the pace and the scale needed on our overstocked forests to reduce the risk for catastrophic fires. Streamline the permitting so that the United States can produce minerals that are critical to our national security. Provide access to rural communities, so that they can build and sustain thriving economies.

And then of course the one issue that I have not mentioned this morning, we discussed yesterday, but it is a significant one. You have another major job, and that is the internal reforms to put an end to the sexual harassment and assault that have plagued the Forest Service. I have been horrified, really horrified, to learn about what has been happening, over the course of years and decades. It is categorically unacceptable, and I know that you share that. Improving the culture and guaranteeing a safe workplace must be one of your highest priorities.

Ms. Christiansen, I know that you are new to this position, we are still waiting on an Under Secretary at the Department, but I do appreciate your commitment to work with me, work with us, to put the Forest Service back on the right path. So thank you for being here this morning, will look forward to our exchange.

Senator Cantwell?

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