**OPENING STATEMENT**
**WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT HEARING**
**SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI**

June 4, 2013

We are going to examine our national wildfire policy – This includes the efforts of land managers to coordinate and collaborate with partners at the State and federal levels to improve wildfire response, prevention and restoration of fire-adapted wildlands, the dynamic tensions between fire to sustain wildland health in certain ecosystems and the need to minimize negative impacts to people and their homes from wildfire. And of course the escalating federal costs of these activities. In a constrained federal budget environment we all must be more strategic about how we use our limited federal resources.

As more and more people live and work in and around forests, grasslands, and other wildland areas , the fire-related challenges of managing wildlands and the associated risk to life and property, have significantly increased the complexity and costs of suppressing these wildfires.

The total amount of funding appropriated for wildfire management has averaged $3.5 billion from FY2008 to present. The majority of wildland fire management funding goes to the Forest Service. In FY 2012 the Forest Service wildland fire management funding totaled nearly 41 percent of the total discretionary funds appropriated to the agency.

It was because firefighting was eating up the agencies budgets and causing the agencies to engage in fire borrowing –transferring money from non-fire agency programs to pay for emergency firefighting costs–that Congress enacted into law the Federal Land Assistance Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act.

Despite the explicit Congressional intent of FLAME to provide funding above the 10-year average cost of suppression it has not been implemented in this manner. Instead, the agencies' budget proposals fund the 10-year rolling average using both suppression accounts and the FLAME reserve fund. The May 2013 forecasts for annual suppression expenditures put out by the agencies in season, as required by FLAME, seem to put the agency on the same trajectory as last year, and thus, would again lead to fire borrowing. My understanding is that the Office of Management and Budget may be part of the problem here. Regardless we need to figure this out. The agencies cannot continue to raid non-fire accounts to pay for firefighting.

That brings me to aerial firefighting specifically. The increased use of aircraft is also contributing to the rising costs of fighting wildfires. We all recognize that the agencies need an aviation fleet for firefighting, but I am perplexed at just how much the agencies have struggled with developing and executing an aviation strategy, particularly with respect to modernizing the aged airtanker fleet. Numerous studies, reports and plans have been completed over the years and another GAO investigation is underway right now. Yet we still don't seem to have a clear picture of what a safe, efficient, effective and sustainable national aviation program should look like.

Can a newer, more modern aviation fleet ultimately help rein in firefighting costs and help mitigate the devastating impacts of wildfire? I have been listening to the agencies for years tell me that it can. I want to believe that, but there is scant data that has been collected on actual aviation firefighting performance to back up the claim and ultimately support the acquisition of expensive new aircraft. Even your best business case has yet to pass muster with the Office of Management and Budget.

Tied to the question of escalating suppression costs has been whether sufficient investment in hazardous fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration can reduce the risk of catastrophic fire and in turn reduce suppression expenditures.

Congress has already spent a tremendous amount of taxpayer money on fuel reduction activities. Beginning in FY2001, federal lands fuel reduction funding rose substantially to over 400 million. It continued to rise steadily through FY2008, to nearly $620 million. Now, the agencies are proposing substantial reductions in fuel reduction activities and Congress is having a harder time justifying increasing the expenditures. One of the reasons is that there are still outstanding questions about whether all this work has truly made a difference.

I look forward to hearing from all of our witnesses on these important issues.