



Opening Statement
Hearing on Wildfire Management in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 9, 2020

Thank you to the members of the committee for approving the nomination of Mr. Menezes. This morning we have scheduled a hearing on wildfire management in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just as COVID-19 has altered our daily lives – requiring us to don face masks, practice social distancing, and remain in self-isolation – the virus has also added a new layer of complexity for our wildland firefighters.

This year, these heroes will be fighting wildfires while simultaneously working to protect themselves and others from a pandemic that threatens them, their families, and communities.

I understand the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have developed guidance on social distancing and other COVID-19 mitigation measures for wildland firefighters. The health and safety of these individuals is a top priority, and I encourage the agencies to continue these efforts.

This summer fire season is shaping up to be as severe as any. As fire activity increases, we can expect over 20,000 firefighters to be mobilized by the Forest Service, Interior, and their state, tribal, local, and volunteer cooperators.

At a moment's notice, fire personnel will be traveling by airplane and vehicle across state borders. Large concentrations of firefighters, support specialists, and private service contractors will be assigned to Incident Command Posts – “fire camps” – where they will eat, rest, and stage equipment and supplies. What was operationally routine before may be exactly the kinds of activities that now risk spreading the coronavirus around the fire services.

First responders at the state and local level are already stretched thin due to COVID-19 response. This year's summer fire season is already well underway and adding to the strain. In the state of Alaska we've seen 79 wildland fires to date, total acres burned 41 thousand, total number of active staffed fires are at about three right now. So we are in our season. Last week, we saw nearly a dozen uncontained large fires were raging in the West, several new large incidents were reported over the weekend. It's also possible that regions like northern California will see a second wave of fires in the fall if Santa Ana winds pick up and dry conditions persist on the West Coast.

Overall, experts at the National Interagency Fire Center are projecting this year's fire activity to be more active than 2019. Last year, 4.7 million acres were consumed by fire. That was 25 percent below the average acres-burned over the past 10 years.

So some me may look at those numbers and say we were lucky there. But over half of those acres burned were in the state of Alaska. We had one of the largest, and most expensive, and heavily-staffed fires last year – this was the Swan Lake Fire up on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, burned off and on for almost four months.

There were over 3,000 people that were assigned to that fire, including hundreds of firefighters from the Lower 48. So, I think it just reminds us that even in a “below average” year, the fallout from a small fraction of infections on a fire like we saw last year in Swan Lake could result in a significant number of COVID-19 cases this year. So we need to do everything possible to prevent that – and ensure that our firefighters don't fall ill or have to self-quarantine.

Through this hearing, it's my hope that we begin to understand how firefighting tactics and strategies are being reimagined.

I would also like to just very briefly add at the end of my comments here that all of us have a responsibility here. We want to use our great outdoors, in fact we have the Great Outdoors Act on the floor right now. And a recognition that when we go outside we have a responsibility to be careful as well. Those who live or work in forest communities, those who will be camping and recreating outdoors this summer, just take precautions. Be careful. Be vigilant. And, as I mentioned, it is our personal responsibility in many ways as individuals, but it's also a responsibility to clear hazardous trees, to deal with overgrown vegetation around your homes and your properties. Pay attention to weather conditions. Put out your campfires. Some of these are not rocket science, but they can make a difference.

Drought, a changing climate, and management practices have all contributed to our forests becoming dangerously flammable. Each of us can do our part to help our firefighters by creating fire resilient neighborhoods and communities.

With that I turn to my friend and Ranking Member, Senator Manchin.

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