



Opening Statement
Hearing on the 2019 Wildfire Season Outlook
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 13, 2019

Good morning, the committee will come to order.

We're here today to discuss the outlook for the 2019 wildfire season, as we know, it's underway across the country. It's certainly underway in my state, I know it's underway in Washington state, California most certainly. And, we've all received the – West Virginia you're okay right now – but if you look at that map, the red in the southwest is something to pay attention to as well.

Last week, the National Interagency Fire Center released its monthly wildland fire potential outlook for June through September. And despite relief from the oppressive drought conditions this past winter, analysts predict elevated wildfire activity in California, Oregon, and Washington, among other areas in the country.

Some observers believe the stage is set for fire activity similar to the indescribable damage and staggering loss of life that we saw last year in Northern California. We watched in horror as the Camp Fire engulfed the town of Paradise killing 85 individuals, some of whom were trapped in vehicles on rural roads trying to escape the blaze.

So, we're back again. Over the past week, we've seen an uptick in wildfires nationally.

The Oregon Lakes Fire back in Alaska continues to burn in the Donnelly Training Area, this is a U.S. Army range. In addition to the hazards of fighting there, our folks there are very carefully monitoring and spot-treating the fire as it moves across [Department of Defense] land that contains unexploded ordinance, so just yet another threat that is out there. I understand that the vast majority of our fires are lightning strikes, and they predict a lot more lightning in this next week.

This weekend in Arizona, smoke billowing from the Mountain Fire at the outskirts of Phoenix suburbs prompted the closures of a popular weekend campground and marinas in the Tonto National Forest. So Arizona is seeing it, as Senator McSally knows.

A fast moving brush fire in L.A. County triggered a panicked evacuation of hundreds of families from a crowded Six Flags amusement park. Some patrons reported that they were actually on the rollercoaster rides and ash began burning their eyes.

North of Sacramento, more than 500 firefighters have been working in triple digit heat to tame the Sand Fire. On Saturday, 22,000 people were left without power when transmission lines

outside the burn area were intentionally de-energized as a precaution. But, this is the new normal out there, if we want to try to deal with some of this fire threat what we're going to do is turn off the power.

We've seen time and again how something simple like a small spark on breezy day can bring about devastating infernos. The Mendocino Complex Fire – which was the largest fire in California's history – was started by a hammer hitting a metal stake near tall, dry grass. We've all seen the news accounts of that recently.

Every summer we see our home states erupt in flames. More wildfires are occurring in the East and central states, while the fires in the West grow larger and certainly more severe.

There are a number of reasons why our forests and grasslands are increasingly susceptible to fire. A changing climate means dryer and warmer weather. Much of our nation's forest landscapes are unhealthy and overstocked with excess fuels. And the proliferation of disease and insect outbreaks, certainly like we've seen in Alaska and elsewhere around the country, certainly Colorado, but these leave behind large swaths of hazard trees ready to ignite just like matchstick out there.

In Alaska, warmer winters have led to a population boom of spruce beetle across nearly one million acres in just a few years now. We have communities on the Kenai Peninsula and now up in the Mat-Su Valley that are just scrambling to remove the dead and the dying trees from neighborhoods and along highways.

Year in and year out, these factors continue to compound creating the perfect recipe for longer, costlier, and more damaging fire season. In 2018, more than 8.8 million acres burned across the country, double the average acres-burned in the 1990s. Last year was also the most expensive wildfire season on record, on record. The federal government spent more than \$3.1 billion in suppression costs. So this is not only a human catastrophe, but certainly a financial cost, an increase that is beyond belief. Just a few years ago, in 2015, more than five million acres that burned in Alaska alone – that was truly a catastrophic year for us. The, I suppose the good news for that, if you can see any good news in 5 million acres burned, is that very little in property damage because of where these fires were located. But, we certainly see that with these intense fires in the Lower 48.

So Congress has started to respond by expanding the authorities that federal land managers can use for wildfire prevention.

We've given the Forest Service greater latitude to partner with their states, local governments, and tribes to reduce hazardous fuels on federal lands near forest communities and out in the larger landscape.

We've streamlined the federal environmental review process to expedite projects aimed at restoring our forests to their natural, fire-adapted state.

And we've initiated a \$2 billion increase in how we budget for wildfire suppression. That change will take effect later this year at the start of FY 2020.

Without delay, we are counting on the Forest Service and the Interior Department to utilize its full suite of resources for fire prevention and active forest management. And here in Congress, we will continue to work on additional reforms to reduce the threat of wildfire.

So today we've got a good panel to discuss the outlook for the wildfire season. We have from the state of Alaska Chris Maisch, who is our State Forester, but he is testifying on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters. He's been before the Committee before, and we welcome you back, Chris. Mr. Wade Crowfoot is the Secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, and he's going to discuss the wildfire crisis facing the state of California. Representing the Department of the Interior is Jeff Rupert, the Director of the Office of Wildland Fire. And we have Shawna Legarza, who is the Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service.

Ms. Legarza is a longtime civil servant of the Forest Service with over 30 years of wildland fire management experience. She was once a hotshot superintendent, she began fighting forest fires to work her way through college as a young woman. We all know, and we've had opportunity here in the committee to discuss the issue of workplace safety for women in the Forest Service, particularly those working on fire crews, it's been a priority for this committee. So will I look forward to your unique perspective on this issue as well as we're discussing the issues relating to wildland fires.

With that, I will turn to Senator Manchin for his comments.

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