



**Opening Statement  
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)  
Hearing on U.S. Forest Service FY 2017 Budget  
March 8, 2016**

“Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Chief, for coming today to discuss the budget.

“As you know, in 2014, Washington experienced the largest and worst wildfire in state history—the Carlton Complex. In 2015, as we were still recovering from the Carlton Complex, Washington was hit hard again—this time even harder—and experienced the worst fire season in the history of our state. In one month, more than 1 million acres of Washington burned. That’s an area larger than the size of the state of Rhode Island.

“Adding to the economic losses and the loss of homes and businesses that were quite tragic, on top of that, firefighters were killed and another was severely burnt in an entrapment. The Colville Tribe lost 20 percent of its timber—that’s about \$1 billion worth of timber.

“And I spent last summer traveling the state, meeting with firefighters and residents to talk about everything from the evacuation process to loss of their homes, to numerous things that we as policymakers can do to help so that fewer homes burn down, so we keep our firefighters safe and to decrease the intensity of these fires so they can be managed better.

“I appreciated that the committee and my colleague, Sen. Barrasso, attended a field hearing in Seattle to talk about these issues, as well. All of this underscores the importance of these issues and getting the right solution.

“We need to better protect our communities and our firefighters from these wildfires. Guided by science, we need to invest in and pursue policies that will make our forests more resilient to these wildfires. We need more equipment and more efficient use of existing resources to have a more ‘hasty’ response at the initial attack to these wildfires.

“Fortunately, as you can see from the chart behind me, as Chairman Murkowski mentioned, the Forest Service had a 60 percent increase in firefighting funding for this year—giving us a window to come up with a more functional solution. We certainly appreciate the work of my colleagues in getting that 60 percent increase.



"I know that Chairman Murkowski's state also experienced one of its worst fire seasons in Alaska's history, and we've been working together for months on legislation to get us ahead of this problem.

"We've had several hearings where we have talked about different solutions to get different results. Particularly, I believe we need a better fire preparedness strategy. Better fire preparedness will reduce the risk posed to communities and our forests and will reduce the costs to our nation.

"Some of these estimates are that we could be spending anywhere between \$2-4 billion a year for the next several years, given the changes in conditions. So we need to start – obviously, once we get the energy bill done – to focus on this issue and come up with legislation that will help all of our communities.

"I believe legislation should set key priorities of preparedness. We must increase our communities' preparedness through activities such as hazardous fuels reduction, FireWise® programs, changing the time and function of prescribed burns, and risk-mapping.

"We also need to improve the efficiency of our operations by using aircraft when available and improving the safety of our firefighters. And for us in the Northwest, it even means getting a better Doppler system just to forecast weather conditions since we have a blind spot right in the central part of our state.

"We can invest in—and prioritize—fuels treatments that we know make a difference in at-risk areas, such as prescribed burns and mechanical thinning. I hope that we will in the future talk about ideas to be very innovative on this. To me, it makes no sense to talk about what you do after the fires happen, as much as we should be talking about what to do to minimize the risk to everyone – specifically, the \$2-4 billion in costs we are looking at each year from these fires.

"The funding that you awarded last week to groups in Washington through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership is a great example of this. Thank you. It will help at-risk communities with fire preparedness in Kittitas, Chelan and Okanogan Counties.

"And finally, we can increase our use of technology, including unmanned aerial vehicles and GPS, so we can more accurately see the locations of 'spot' fires when firefighters are sent out.

"I look forward to working out the remaining details with many of the members of this committee, including Chairman Murkowski, as we try to bring together legislative solutions here.



“Turning to the Secure Rural Schools program, if I could for a moment, I want to express my concern with the delay in distributing the 2015 Secure Rural Schools payments. These 2015 payments have still not been distributed to communities.

“The fiscal years of counties in Washington begin in a few months. So I can’t imagine some of these counties trying to plan their annual budget not knowing how much funding they are going to get from the Forest Service.

“In Skamania County, the Secure Rural Schools payments represent more than 15 percent of the budget. These payments pay the salaries of more than half of Skamania County’s 65 employees.

“For our rural and timber communities, these are very serious issues.

“I noticed there was not a lot of detail in the administration’s proposal to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools program. But nonetheless, I look forward to working with you, the chairman and other interested members of this committee, including Senator Wyden, over the coming months to extend this crucial program.

“I also want to thank you, Chief Tidwell, for last week’s announcement, concerning recreation permits. I completely agree that we need to be finding ways to streamline the Forest Service’s processes in order to make it easier for more young people to get outdoors.

“I know Secretary Jewell announced a similar proposal across all of Interior’s lands programs. And it was right here in this hearing room, at last year’s budget hearing, when you and I talked about the problems that the YMCA of Greater Seattle was having in getting a permit from the Forest Service.

“I am delighted to hear that you and Secretary Jewell are embarking on what I think is a very significant process to make it easier for young people and groups like the YMCA to move through the current permitting process and open the door for hundreds of young people and youth organizations.

“Despite the good points, there are gaps in this year’s budget request. We should work to address these.

“We can do more to work together on recreational access. Small businesses in my state that rely on the recreation economy are confused about some of the priorities in this budget. For



example, the Forest Service is proposing to cut road maintenance and is currently exploring ways to close some major recreational routes in my state. We are going to hear loudly from people on this, so I hope we can ask a question and get some details on that.

“In the same budget, the agency is proposing a significant increase in new roads. So people are trying to understand the new roads versus the maintenance. But without much of an explanation, we want to understand how we make sure these priorities are met on both sides.

“I want to take a point of personal privilege, if I could, and conclude my remarks by recognizing the passing of my cousin, Shelia Cantwell. She was, like many Forest Service employees, dedicated to her career. She served 23 years in the Forest Service, working at the Mount Whitney Ranger Station in Lone Pines. Like many other people in the Forest Service, they do their work and love their job. I want to thank all of the people in the Forest Service for all of their work and dedication.

“And I turn it back to you, Chairman Murkowski.”

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