



United States Senate Committee on

Energy & Natural Resources



Senator Lisa Murkowski, Alaska, *Chairman*

Opening Statement
Senator Lisa Murkowski
Forest Management Oversight Hearing
March 24, 2015

Good morning, everyone. The hearing will come to order. Welcome to all.

We're here to review the management of our national forests and what we can do – together and responsibly – to make them healthy and productive for the people who enjoy them, and who rely on them.

Over the last 20-plus years the management of our forests – or I would probably say, reluctantly, the lack of management thereof – has resulted in a crisis of epic proportions for local communities.

According to the Forest Service's own statistics, there are 65 to 82 million acres in need of some kind of restoration treatment because they are at high risk from severe wildland fires that threaten human safety and ecosystem integrity. I noted in my hometown newspaper over the weekend that with the low snowpack, low precipitation over the winter, and probably an early spring, that we are looking at an early and perhaps an extensive fire season. That doesn't make us feel too good up there but, Mr. Bonnie, you know what I'm talking about.

Of the acreage that requires restoration treatment, 12.5 million acres require some level of mechanical treatment to thin overly-dense stands.

Nearly 18 million acres of conifer trees have been lost to Bark Beetle alone. And recently the Forest Service designated 45 million acres as insect and disease epidemic areas in need of treatment at the request of Governors under the 2014 Farm bill. A million and a half of those acres are in my state of Alaska.

At the same time, the annual timber cut has dropped by more than 80 percent, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of timber jobs, closed schools, and local government budget shortfalls.

The Secure Rural Schools program provided a temporary lifeline to timber-dependent communities. But in these tough budget times, paying for it is increasingly difficult – and the prospect of simply continuing to make payments from the federal treasury is increasingly unsustainable.

The California loggers who visited my office last week had it right – American forests work only if they do.

There are many factors that have contributed to where we are with this crisis situation. The policies that govern our national forests have evolved over time to reflect new, sometimes competing, priorities of a changing society.

Policymakers and the Forest Service have not done a very good job of effectively integrating the body of laws, regulations, and court decisions so there is no clear guidance for the management of our national forests.

Still gripping the Forest Service is what former chief Dale Bosworth described as “analysis paralysis.” This maze of congressional mandates, administrative directives, executive orders, secretarial memos, and court decisions is a minefield of litigation opportunity some have been only too eager to exploit.

Progress, today, has been redefined to be completion of the “process” rather than implementation of a project on the ground. Southeast Alaska is a case in point. Its forest industry, once the second largest in the State, is barely hanging on. We have one medium-size sawmill that’s left.

In 1990, a decade after passage of the Alaska lands act that cut federal timber harvests in Southeast Alaska by more than half, timber accounted for 6,113 direct and indirect jobs, or 79% of *all* manufacturing jobs in the state.

By 2000, due to a host of restrictive factors like the 1990 Tongass Timber Reform Act and the Inventory Roadless Area rule, timber accounted for only 1,500 manufacturing jobs.

And then by early 2014, there were only 547 wood and forestry jobs left in Alaska, accounting for just 1.5% of our employment. Now, some may welcome the demise of our forest industries, but I most certainly do not. Many in Southeast share my concern. We saw a net loss in population between 2000 and 2010.

While mining and the seafood industries have picked up some of the economic slack, the region’s economy is still weak. Unemployment was at 17% last month on Prince of Wales Island, the largest remaining timber-producing area in the state.

Now, the Secretary of Agriculture is ready with what I have said could be the final nail in the coffin – Transition” – moving from harvesting old growth to second growth in 10 to 15 years.

To its credit, the Forest Service recognized that there is not enough young growth to support the current forest products industry – so it put up the Big Thorne Stewardship Contract to provide “bridge timber.”

The notice of intent for the Big Thorne project EIS was issued in February 2011, over four years ago. The sale was awarded last November – since then this critical project has been tied up in litigation.

We passed a big hurdle last Friday on Big Thorne when a Federal District Court Judge upheld the sale and dismissed claims challenging it. The lawsuit isn't necessarily over, however. The environmental activist plaintiffs could appeal the decision to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals and seek an injunction.

And the Forest Service's Tongass Supervisor eloquently stated the problem with that in the Juneau Empire last November: "The Plaintiffs don't have to win, they just have to delay." And, "If they delay long enough, Viking goes out of business." Some would argue that that's been the plan here all along. Not to just cut it off, but to delay enough that those in the industry just give up. That's not what forest policy should look like.

This is why many communities, including in Alaska, believe the only solution is to get out from under the existing management structure and take control of their own destiny.

Given everything we have seen, it is hard to blame them. But the goal of this Committee, in this Congress, will be to help them. That's what my intention is here this morning.

I thank our witnesses for being here today. We have some of you who have traveled distances to be with us, and we certainly appreciate that. We look forward to your comments and your perspectives this morning.

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