



Opening Statement
Hearing on the U.S. Forest Service FY 2020 Budget Request
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
April 9, 2019

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

We are here today to consider the President’s budget request for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2020.

Before I begin this morning, I do want to extend the committee’s condolences over the loss of Forest Service firefighter, Captain Daniel Laird of Yuba City, California. Captain Laird died on March 27th in a helicopter crash while working on a controlled burn on the Sam Houston National Forest in Texas. His death is a solemn reminder to all of us of the dangers that wildland firefighters face every day when they go out there to go to work. So know that our thoughts and prayers are with his family and the entire Forest Service.

It’s good to have you back before the committee, Chief Christiansen. The last time you appeared here you were yet the interim chief, so congratulations on your appointment now to Chief.

So, let’s talk about the budget request. I think we all recognize that most every budget that we’ve seen come before us is not perfect. This is in that category, but I am glad to see it is taking steps to carry out a shared stewardship approach to management – working across boundaries and sharing decision-making with states and locals. This is critically important for the health and wellbeing of our forests and rural communities.

So, you know I always have to talk about the Tongass when we’re talking about our forests. The Tongass is the largest national forest. Yet, about 93 percent of its lands are off-limits to most development, which certainly does not benefit the 32 islanded communities located there. It is really hard to have an economy when everything is off limits to you. More access is needed in the Tongass and to the natural resources it contains to make it a working forest again.

In my mind, that starts with restoring the Roadless exemption on the Tongass. So I thank Secretary Perdue and his team for accepting the State of Alaska’s Petition and directing the Forest Service to launch the state-specific rulemaking that is now underway. As you all continue to work through this, I do hope you will recognize that the Roadless Rule is not an example of shared stewardship. I do think we have a greater opportunity to apply that model in southeast Alaska, but it’s not through the Roadless.

So, turning to fire, the Forest Service estimates that 80 million acres of its lands are at risk for extreme fire behavior. Last year, 8.8 million acres burned across the United States, and that was

punctuated by the tragic Camp Fire in northern California, where 86 individuals perished, making it the deadliest fire in state history.

Last month, Governor Newsom issued an emergency declaration that curbed environmental litigation and activated the National Guard to help expedite fuel treatments near threatened communities—in recognition of the urgent need to thin our forests and address the overwhelming cost of fighting fires.

In 2018 alone, the Forest Service spent a record-breaking \$2.6 billion on suppression—\$2.6 billion on fire suppression last year, really unprecedented. And once again, the agency raided non-fire accounts to pay for rising suppression costs.

But beginning in this fiscal year, we've got a new regime effectively out there, the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior will have the "fire fix" that Congress passed in the FY 2018 Omnibus to cover firefighting costs that exceed regular appropriations.

The "fire fix" budget framework treats wildfires more like natural disasters to end the destructive practice of fire borrowing and stabilize operations in the non-fire programs. So I'm going to look forward to really seeing how this works, because for years we have heard as we've talked to folks in different agencies that we don't have the resources and everyone blames fire. Well, now supposedly that we are working to address that I do hope that we will hear some better reports from the various agencies. And while I do support the fire fix, I am concerned that this budget does not invest enough in the management of our forests to reduce the risk of a wildfire.

Congress also included several modest forest management reforms in the FY 2018 Omnibus and in the new Farm bill. I look forward to hearing from the Forest Service how it is utilizing those tools. So, you've got some new things to work with out there, so how you move forward is going to be of interest to this committee.

I do maintain, however, that these reforms are simply not enough to improve the health and resilience of our national forests. I am still hopeful we can work together on a bipartisan basis, hopefully a bicameral basis, with the Administration, on a package of meaningful management reforms in this Congress to further address this issue.

Another area where we have to do more is recreation. Recreation is clearly the greatest use of our national forests right now, but I don't see how this budget particularly reflects that. We had a full committee hearing on recreation last month and heard a lot about the need for permitting reform, I hope some of that message got back to you and your folks. I am hopeful that we can make some meaningful progress on it.

As I end my comments this morning, it is on a topic of great importance – and that is the workplace environment. The Forest Service will never effectively carry out its multiple-use mission if the workplace environment is not safe, if it's not respectful, and if it's not free of harassment and retaliation of all kinds. You and I, chief, have had an opportunity to discuss this, but I think creating a positive workplace environment must be priority number one for you within the agency. So, I look forward to learning more about your efforts here.

Senator Manchin?

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