

Opening Statement
Senator Lisa Murkowski
Legislative Hearing – Oregon and California Land Grant Act of 2013
and National Forest Jobs and Management Act
February 6, 2014

“We have two bills before us today addressing the critical topic of the management of our federal timberlands. I very much appreciate your willingness to include Senator Barrasso’s bill in this hearing and his work to prepare his bill to accommodate an accelerated schedule. I am grateful that working together we were able to make it happen.

“Mr. Chairman, I would like to make a couple of comments on process.

“This hearing was noticed a week ago and had been in the works for several weeks before that. Yet we received testimony from this Administration on both of these bills late last evening. The Forest Service submitted its testimony on S. 1966 at 6:30 pm; The Bureau of Land Management at 8 pm. This is not constructive to the Committee hearing process. I expect these agencies to do better in the future.

“Turning to your bill first, Mr. Chairman, I know the management of the Oregon and California Lands in your State is a very important issue to you. You and I have talked about it and we touched upon it as a Committee in June last year as we identified the obstacles to actively managing our forests.

“As I understand it, in Oregon on the O&C, at issue is the management of more than 2.4 million acres of timberlands that were, by statute, to be managed for “permanent forest production” under the principle of sustained yield. That mandate was upheld in federal court. Yet, despite that mandate it’s not happening. In Alaska, we have a similar mandate, and we are not seeing the timber harvest levels increase either. So I understand your frustration and desire to try to legislate a better result. Like you, I know this is about certainty and jobs for the people who live in these communities and not only about raising revenue for counties.

“The bill also purports to modernize existing federal laws, including NEPA, to provide certainty that timber harvest will occur and end the vice grip litigation has had on harvest. I appreciate the acknowledgement that these laws need modernizing. From all the press accounts, the debate has already begun about whether these provisions would work, what levels of timber harvest and revenue the bill would generate, and the appropriate management regime for these lands. Given the well-stocked panel of witnesses, I am sure that debate will continue here today.

“The other bill we have before us, Senator Barrasso’s National Forest Jobs and Management Act, would launch a national pilot to accelerate the pace and scale of timber harvest on the acres already identified in existing forest management plans as suitable for such harvest. The bill would expand concepts already reflected in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act to streamline NEPA compliance and reduce the cost and time of planning. The bill also introduces arbitration, as an alternative dispute resolution process to the courts where we have seen many good projects die.

“Both bills raise critical issues that deserve our attention. It is possible that this hearing will be your last as Chairman of this Committee, so it is appropriate that it should be a topic that is so near to your heart. I’m looking forward to hearing from our witnesses today, and further discussion about the importance of timber management on our federal lands.”