

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing on Wildfire Discussion Draft June 23, 2016

“Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for having this hearing this morning. I think this is a culmination this morning of a lot of hard work in this discussion draft – more than two years, and if you include the work of our predecessors, two to three more years before that.

“So I am glad that our colleagues are both here – Sen. Wyden and Sen. Stabenow are both here because of the roles they have played on this issue, as well.

“I, too, could start with some statistics from our state:

- the worst fire seasons we have had in Washington occurred in the last two years;
- 10 million acres burned last year;
- 4,600 houses that were destroyed; and obviously
- the very sad fact of the increasing rate of fatalities of our firefighters.

“We’re going to hear from Commissioner Goldmark who is here from our state, and he is going to tell us in more detail about all of that. I appreciate him being on the second panel.

“Instead of going over more statistics, I would like to spend some time talking about what I think we should do to reduce the risk, intensity and costs of wildfires.

“Scientists are telling us that these fire seasons are both longer and hotter. An April report from Headwaters Economics said that a 1-degree increase in temperature would result in: a doubling of firefighting costs, a 25 percent increase in the number of wildfires, and a 35 percent increase in the number of acres burned.

“Just a 1-degree change in temperature will make our national fire problem even more complex. I believe we must effectively address the root causes of the problems with fire risk and fire budgeting. If this is the new ‘normal,’ then we need better strategies to deal with the problem. And I’m glad that Undersecretary Bonnie and Mr. Rice are here to talk about some of those strategies today. Because I don’t think the temperature change is going to stop, and I think we will have continued risk.



“Our efforts need to be guided by science, and the science tells us that we need policies to make our most at-risk forests more resilient to wildfires, to keep our firefighters safer and to better protect our Western communities from wildfires. We have seen the economic impacts of this; the Colville tribe alone lost more than \$1 billion of timber revenue last fire season.

“We also have the Director of CAL-FIRE joining us on the second panel today. Chief Pimlott’s testimony discusses at length the need to treat the fuels that have built up on the National Forests. The discussion draft includes a pine pilot provision, as the chair said, and I think it is a key provision that any Western senator should be excited about.

“As part of a new strategy, the firefighting community and the federal land management agencies need new tools related to fire. We need to be proactive in reducing fire risk. The discussion draft before the committee today contains a number of tools that would help us deal with that. I would like to talk about the pine pilot specifically.

“That section directs the agencies to focus their efforts on the places that will make the most difference in terms of changing our fire risk.

“We’ve printed out a couple charts to show everyone some of the science that this pilot is built upon. The Forest Service has ranked the different parts of the National Forests based on fire risk. The most at-risk places are in red.

“This next chart is from the former head of fire from the Forest Service, published in a Harvard academic paper. It shows the close connection between ponderosa pine forests and the large fires that we have been experiencing. Scientists tell us that restoring the health of ponderosa pine forests through thinning and prescribed fire is among the best, most effective way to deal with this issue.

“After merging the two maps, we’ve identified 2 million acres that we want the Forest Service to place a priority on treating.

“These 2 million acres are simultaneously the most at-risk of fire, the projects would have the largest impact in reducing fuels, and the places that are the best-supported by the science and the public.

“In this pilot, we would provide the tools to the agency, such as long-term contracts to individual mills with a preference for cross-laminated timber, so we are actually securing more sustainable buildings. These tools will help us get the work done AND help us have a much



more proactive discussion than the discussion that happens after the fire. We need to do more fuel reduction.

“Implementing this program would change fire risk. There’s a great video out there that the Spokane Tribe just released on how their recent fuel treatments fared in last summer’s Carpenter Road Fire. I recommend everyone look it up on YouTube under “Carpenter Road Fire—Fuels Treatment Effectiveness Monitoring.” They actually installed time-lapse cameras in the pine forests where the fire burned through. The video provides compelling evidence of the value that the pine pilot can have on the National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands.

“More broadly, of course, there are other provisions of this bill that we also need to implement. But, with a 1-degree temperature change driving the challenge, scientists are saying that this kind of investment actually reduces the size of the fires, and I think that is what we need to try to target.

“Other provisions in the discussion draft include community preparedness. First, \$600 million would be authorized to help at-risk communities. I know my colleagues from the West understand this. Whether you are talking about communities like Twisp, Wenatchee or the Yakama Reservation, these communities need help and support. Small communities on the front lines of fighting these fires must have some immediate capital ready to do some hasty response.

“We also have a section in the draft on new technology to deploy GPS and drones. *Wildfire Today* refers to the technology solution in the discussion draft as “the Holy Grail” of firefighting. For the first time ever, incident managers would be able to see in real-time the location of the fire and their crews.

“Dozers. The bill also ensures that we will work together effectively, that agencies use all of the firefighting equipment available that can do wonders in helping to engage in what several entities have called a “hasty response.”

“Last year, as I traveled through the state, thinking that I was going to be reviewing the previous year’s fire season, then a huge, new fire season opened up. In community after community, we held roundtables, including with Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, and a later hearing. This issue couldn’t have been clearer for my constituents: knit together a cooperative, so that those on the front lines who have the tools to do some immediate response don’t all of a sudden get stopped at a line that says ‘DNR or Forest Service: you don’t have the right cross it.’



“We need to figure it out because there is so much capacity – people want to help and coordinate – and I know we can do it. I know our community came together in the aftermath of Oso – the federal government, the county government and the local government worked together diligently to try to find those individuals impacted by a devastating landslide. I’m sure we can do the same for those impacted by wildfires.

“The discussion draft would also help ensure that communications infrastructure remains functioning during wildfire season. Again, this was an issue where communities were trying to activate broadband communication, but were unable to. Getting federal support for emergency broadband communication was not accessible until after the emergency declaration was declared, which requires filing paperwork and sending it away for a month of deliberation. At that time, they are still trying to communicate. We have to come up with a solution, and this draft does.

“I’m ready to call fire borrowing, ‘The Great Debate.’ This senator is agnostic as to how we solve it, but I do have a couple of principles in general.

“We cannot rob Peter to pay Paul. The Forest Service needs both the money to fight the fires and the money dedicated to do fuel reductions. So we have to produce a draft out of here that gives them the ability to do both.

“On the implementation of the pine pilot, I would just say, the state of Washington invested \$18 million in 2014 to rebuild salmon habitat, but most of that was burned up in 2015. So we need to have dedicated funds to protect our investments – the federal government’s investments – if we are going to deal with the fire problem. We need dedicated funding for fuel reduction, and we need dedicated funding to fight the fires.

“Today, firefighting constitutes 50 percent of the Forest Service budget. Reports say the proportion will grow to 67 percent in the next ten years, and that means more than \$700 million less for the non-fire accounts, if we continue to try to solve it this way.

“I hope that we will all work together, and I look forward to Undersecretary Bonnie’s comments on this of how we are going to solve this. Because we have had a shift in temperature that demands a new response.

“To date, Senator Murkowski and I have received more than 200 comment letters on the discussion draft. A number of groups want more things included in this draft. I personally want a more robust controlled burn section. This is a very complex issue, and I know many of my



constituents do not want to see smoke in their communities – we understand that. But trying to do more prescribed burns in dry, hot months in August is the wrong idea. We need the flexibility to do it in the wetter months of the Pacific Northwest, not when the fuel is so built up and the conditions are so dry. We need to work together on that.

“A number of groups want provisions of the draft removed (such as the Tongass piece), and a number of groups have provided feedback on how to make the sections more useful, like discussions on the pine pilot.

“All I know is that we have to come together to solve this issue. I appreciate so much my colleagues here today who have been working on this issue for several years, as well. I’d like to submit, also, this chart that would show where the boardfeet of potential pine forest reductions would come from by state, and so my colleagues can see this. This is not something, Madam Chair, that I come to easily. But I think that this is a better path forward than the route we have been going with the aftermath of the fire and trying to decide what to do with salvage logs. We have to, if the federal government is going to be spending between \$2-3 billion a year on fighting fires.

“Because of the increase in risk, we need to do something to reduce the risk, and I think this is a suggestion worth considering.

“Thank you.”

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