



United States Senate Committee on

Energy & Natural Resources



Senator Lisa Murkowski, Alaska, *Chairman*

Opening Statement
Hearing on the Forest Service's FY 2016 Budget Request
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
February 26, 2015

Good morning, everyone. The hearing will come to order. A lighter crowd this morning. Perhaps it's because we're starting a little bit earlier, or perhaps it's because it's a snow day, but it can't possibly be because there's a lack of interest in what goes on within the Forest Service. Chief Tidwell, welcome to the committee, and welcome to Mr. Dixon as well.

We're here for our third and final budget hearing – to review the President's request for the Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2016.

Chief Tidwell, we appreciate you being here to explain this proposal. But I have to tell you – maybe it's because it's still February, maybe it's because we've been seeing a fair amount of snow here in Washington, D.C., but it feels like Groundhog's Day all over again and I know it probably does to you. I'm tired of having the same conversation, year after year, about how the Forest Service is going to get the timber cut up and provide more economic opportunities for rural forested communities.

Over the last decade, the timber harvest from the Tongass has averaged just 35 million board feet a year. This is a forest the size of West Virginia, but severe restrictions, including the roadless designation, have put most of it off-limits.

The Secretary apparently has a plan to transition the timber harvest on the Tongass away from old growth to young growth. But pretty soon, Chief – you and I have talked about this, these small operators are hanging on by their fingernails – I worry that there's not going to be anything to transition to given what we have seen coming out of the Forest Service operations.

Some would suggest that's really the whole point of where we're going. To be in a situation where we are eliminating forestry from the Tongass' economic base. And that is not something that is right. It is not something I can tolerate.

But when you look at what we are seeing, there are no logs in the yard at the only sizable mill. And no federal assistance has been given to retool a single mill to handle young growth in Southeast Alaska.

I think the Forest Service has broken the federal government's promise to actively manage our national forests. And now, the failure to reauthorize Secure Rural Schools is revealing this stark reality to forested communities across the West.

We've reached a point where if we're not cutting trees on federal lands – and we hardly are – then counties, parishes, and boroughs are going to be cutting their budgets. We're certainly seeing that in Alaska and I imagine it's happening in other western states as well. The timber industry can be sustainable, but the funding required for SRS, in the absence of timber harvesting, simply is not sustainable.

The Forest Service can't hide or make excuses any longer. Just \$50 million will be shared nationwide with our communities under the process going forward with SRS. In Alaska, it's just \$537,000. Spread over the entire state. \$537,000 in Alaska.

We are going to work on forest management reform legislation to help resolve this situation – but the Forest Service needs to work with us, and let us help it.

Often we hear that recreation and tourism are the economic engines of the future, and I see this budget would increase funding for recreation programs.

And I agree. Those activities are important. No State is prouder of its recreation industry than Alaska. But recreation and tourism are not substitutes for responsible resource development on federal lands. They're complements to it.

We have, for the past 50 years, shown that resource development, recreation, and tourism can easily coexist. We're proud of that. We're very proud of the fact that people want to come to Alaska. It's on their bucket list. It's the "before I die, I want to see Alaska." And yet they know that we're a resource production state. And our return tourists are what allow for that strong industry. So it's not like we've got a situation where we're not able to balance that within our state. We do it. We have done it. Successfully and sustainably.

Recreation and tourism also require public access and these days, just as we are seeing with resource development, even these activities are being shut down by restrictive federal policies.

When you were up in the state, we had a good opportunity to understand what's going on in the Ketchikan area – Misty Fjords. We have commercial flightseeing operators who take people around to this amazing place. Yet the Forest Service on one had is

saying, “You need to move toward more recreation management,” and then on the other hand they’re saying, “Sorry, we have to limit the landings of floatplanes because they could impede the area’s ‘wilderness character.’” So you’re knocking out floatplanes that would allow so many people to see the Misty Fjords. You can’t see it any other way. It’s not like you can hike in. This is the way you can see it. This is the way you can access it. And yet we’ve got Forest Service saying, “Nope, we’ve got to manage this for ‘wilderness character.’” And it goes beyond just that. I’m going to bring up in my questions the concern that I’m hearing from so many – and this is not just in Alaska – about the limitations about even being allowed to take pictures, or film, because of the limitations and restrictions on our Forest Service lands.

I told Secretary Jewell earlier this week, and it bears repeating, that this Administration is actively impeding many of the best economic opportunities in the West. It is depriving thousands who live in our States of the ability to find a good job, earn a good wage, and live a good life.

Before I conclude my comments, I would be remiss if I did not mention the elephant in the budget – wildfire suppression funding.

This budget again proposes a wildfire suppression cap adjustment – and I share the primary goal of that proposal. We have to stop the cycle of fire borrowing, but I also know there are concerns about the mechanics, particularly in this constrained budget environment.

There are several legislative proposals to consider here, and I hope we can work on them with you, Chief, and the Budget Committee.

With that, I’ll now turn to Ranking Member Cantwell.

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