

Senator Maria Cantwell
Statement for the Record
Lack of Wildfire in Budget Caps Deal
February 9, 2018

Mr. President, I rise to speak about an urgent challenge facing my constituents and my colleagues in the Pacific Northwest that unfortunately was ignored in this massive legislative mishmash we are now being asked to vote up or down on in the middle of the night.

Wildfires.

Communities across the West, including my home state of Washington, are being torn apart by these disasters. Last year the Diamond Creek fire burned 128,000 acres in my State. In 2016, the Okanogan Complex burned 305,000 acres. Just those two fires alone burned an area around two-thirds the size of Rhode Island, and both devastating events spewed ash and toxic smoke across a vast region and destroyed billions of dollars' worth of forest products.

And I am very concerned that these are not freak or rare, once-in-a-generation events. According to our best scientists, the killer combination of climate change and decades of inadequate forest management has made these monster infernos the new normal.

Mr. President, the numbers speak for themselves.

Ten thousand. That's the number of houses that have been burned down in wildfires last year.

18 billion. That's the initial estimate of how much damage wildfires caused just in California last year.

And sadly 54 Americans were killed by these wildfires in 2017.

That's why I have spent years collaborating with other Senators from affected states to hammer out common sense, bipartisan solutions to this increasingly urgent challenge.

First and foremost is the inadequate funding for fire prevention and suppression programs.

How much longer are we going to short change fire programs? The fire budget Congress allocated for this last year was short by over \$1.4 billion.

And under current law, when there is a funding shortfall like this, the Forest Service has to rob its own programs to make it up. What programs? The ones dedicated to fire prevention and forest restoration that could help prevent future fires! That is crazy and very short-sided.

Also, we need a better management strategy for our National Forests--an innovative strategy to manage our forests in smarter, more efficient, and more sustainable ways. There are many case studies of how we can reduce fire risk and increase local forestry jobs, all while restoring forest ecosystems.

For example, the Colville National Forest has been using innovative management tools to reduce the risk of wildfire in northeast Washington. The forward-thinking restoration work being performed by Vaagen Brothers Lumber in Colville has enabled this small National Forest to be ranked in the top three forest products-producing National Forests in the country. And their holistic approach to forest restoration has also earned them the proud spot as the number one National Forest for number of culverts replaced to improve fish passage and water quality.

The success of local projects cannot help but inspire me and my colleagues. I'm pleased to report, Mr. President, that all of the Senators from the Northwest—both Democrat and Republican—have agreed on what is needed to enable the Forest Service to be proactive rather than simply reactive when it comes to wildfires.

Senators Risch, Wyden, Crapo, Murray, Merkley, and I agree that the Forest Service's fire borrowing problem needs to be fixed. All of us co-sponsored legislation to do that.

Senators Risch, Wyden, Crapo, Murray, Merkley, and I also all agree that we should treat the most-at-risk parts of the National Forests before they burn up, and do so in a way that is supported by science. All of us co-sponsored legislation to also do that.

These bills have been endorsed by environmental groups, timber industry, firefighter organizations, and local governments. All of these local and national stakeholders are in agreement: that we need to supply the Forest Service and impacted communities with funding, provide jobs in rural communities, and reduce the fire risk in our most at-risk forests.

But unfortunately, despite the urgency of the problem, despite the strong consensus on both sides of the aisle and amongst a diverse range of stakeholders, despite the fact that we have hammered out legislative text, it appears the inclusion of our bipartisan measure is being blocked from being included in the pending bill.

Mr. President, it hard to over emphasize my frustration at the current situation. It took weeks, months, and in some cases years to develop these proposals and vet with affected stakeholders this suite of bipartisan bills.

The bipartisan consensus legislation we offered last week included a permanent fix to the Forest Service's fire-borrowing problem. That was legislation co-sponsored by 15 Senators. Our proposal also included funding for Secure Rural Schools. That bipartisan legislation was co-sponsored by 32 Senators.

But it turns out there were actors set on blocking our attempts to enact reasonable wildfire legislation. We received a counter-offer at the 11th hour, and it contained only a short-term funding solution with eight new radical land management policies that they knew we could not accept.

The new provisions ranged from repealing protections for old-growth trees on the Tongass National Forest to giving away Federal land. Other objectionable provisions included allowing exemptions for large clearcuts from environmental review and removing people's ability to file lawsuits on Forest Service projects in Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. That is ridiculous.

Instead of working to forward bipartisan ideas, Republican leadership decided to inject "poison pill" environmental riders into the process in a "take it or leave it" midnight offer.

This leaves many of us with a lot of doubt as to whether Republican leadership has ever been serious about fixing wildland fire budgeting. History tonight shows that they see it only as a vehicle to sideline long-established environmental laws that protect people, wildlife, and our public lands.

Well, Mr. President, I want to tell everyone here that we are not giving up. There are so many bi-partisan, non-controversial improvements to Forest Service management that can be enacted.

Members, like my colleagues from the Northwest, want to get something done. Our constituents are demanding it. And we need to do it before the next fire season starts in just a few months.

Mr. President, I want the record to reflect that while there were many provisions I supported in the underlying legislation, I cannot in good conscience vote for a bill that purposely left urgently needed wildland firefighting legislation on the cutting room floor. We can and must do better next time, and I'm going to keep working at it until we get this problem addressed.

I yield the floor.

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