



**Opening Statement
Wildfire Management Hearing
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
May 5, 2015**

We're here to examine our wildfire management policies, including the impacts of wildfire on communities and our current fire operations. Unfortunately, today may be a day where we struggle to find a whole lot that is positive about all of this.

Over the last 50 years, we have seen a rapid escalation in the size, frequency, and severity of wildfires.

The most often cited causes are severe drought, a changing climate, hazardous fuel buildups due in part to decades of fire exclusion, insect and disease infestation, and an explosion of nonnative invasive species.

These are big problems. They are daunting problems and they are problems that are not easily going away. We've already seen the consequences unfold first-hand in my home state of Alaska.

Last May, we had the Funny River Fire just about this time actually – mid May - burned through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. It spread smoke as far as away Fairbanks, more than 500 miles away.

The fire burned nearly 200,000 acres – or 300 square miles – before it was finally extinguished. It was the second-largest ever recorded on the Kenai Peninsula.

It threatened Kasilof, Sterling, and Lower Skilak Lake, forcing residents of those communities to evacuate. We're all thankful there were no apparent fatalities.

The Funny River Fire was likely started by human activity. But the area has also changed dramatically in the last 20 years, due in part to mass spruce bark beetle kill. Grasses have replaced forests, and those grasses are simply more susceptible to fire. More than half of the Peninsula's total forested land, nearly a million acres, has been lost, which is of course a worrisome sign for the future.

Already this year, the concern back home is that we will have an aggressive fire season. We've had very low snow fall throughout the state. It's dry. I was in Fairbanks this weekend and I cannot recall a time on the first of May when not only the rivers are out but there is no snow anywhere – no snow pack anywhere. So, the same factors that we are seeing up North and in the

peninsula are increasing the size, frequency, and severity of wildfires are also driving up wildfire suppression costs, both in actual dollars and as a portion of the total budget of the Forest Service.

Beyond that, the expansion of the wildland-urban interface – WUI – and fire operations strategies and tactics can't be overlooked.

According to a recent USDA Inspector General report, 50 to 95 percent of Forest Service suppression costs were attributable to the defense of private property, much of which is located in the wildland-urban interface.

It is looking more and more like the Forest Service is morphing into an emergency Fire Service that throws everything it has at every wildfire, whether effective or not.

Last year was a good example there. The Forest Service spent \$200 million more on suppression than it spent on average over the last 10 years, despite there being less than half the number of fires, less than half the number of acres burned, and less than half the number of houses burned.

We need a paradigm shift from fire control at all costs to actual fire management. So it's my hope that we can implement a wildfire policy that responsibly funds wildfire suppression needs, ends the unsustainable practice of fire borrowing, helps fire-wise our community, and makes the necessary investments in a full suite of fuel treatments.

These will be my policy goals here in the committee. It will not be easy to achieve them, but if we do, I think we create fire-resilient landscapes in which wildfires can occur without such devastating consequences for our lands, our communities, and for our budgets.

###