



Opening Statement
Hearing on the 2018 Wildfire Season Outlook
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 5, 2018

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

It's nice to be able welcome back to the committee Ms. Christiansen, welcome; Mr. Rupert, welcome to you. We're here this morning to discuss the outlook for the 2018 wildfire season. Just based on what we already know, it doesn't look good.

Last Friday, the National Interagency Fire Center, which is a joint operation between the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service, released its monthly wildland fire potential outlook for June through September. Warmer and drier than average conditions are anticipated, and the southwest, in particular, is at very high risk for wildfires due to elevated drought conditions and strong winds – I feel like a weather reporter here.

The Tinder Fire, sparked on April 27 in central Arizona, marked the first large- scale wildfire of the season in the West. There are now several significant, active fires, including massive blazes in Colorado and New Mexico that are forcing evacuations. Already this year, almost 24,000 wildfires have burned about 1.7 million acres across the country – and this is just June 5.

The number of wildfires and acres that ultimately burn in 2018 depends not only on wildfire potential and forest conditions, but on the timing of lightning strikes and human-caused ignitions.

Nationwide, people are responsible for starting 84 percent of the wildfires. And by starting so many fires, many through human carelessness people are essentially lengthening the fire season into the early spring and later fall, times of the year when lightning does not have a major role.

The Eagle Creek Fire that raged through the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon in 2017 was started by a teenager that was messing around with firecrackers, just one of many examples.

So, with the 2018 fire season upon us I want to start with a plea to people everywhere – just please be smart about fire. We can make a measurable difference in what this wildfire season ends up looking like, and it starts with being careful.

It's also time to execute a multipronged federal-state-local strategy to meet the increasing challenges presented by wildland fire in a cost-efficient manner.

First is innovation. Our committee discusses innovation at length on the energy side of the policy shop, but we also have significant opportunities with respect to land and wildfire management.

Last fall, we held an entire hearing on wildfire technology. I'm particularly interested in the use of unmanned aircraft systems, or drones, which are playing a greater role in wildfire management response from detecting, mapping and even helping to contain wildfires. It is far cheaper to operate, maintain, and train personnel on drones, and it also helps reduce risks for pilots, crews, and firefighters.

The Department of the Interior and the State of Alaska have been early adopters in the use of drones, and not just for wildfire. Interior is using its drones across its management functions, including to monitor the ongoing volcanic eruption in Hawaii.

We can and should do more to embrace technology in land management, including in wildfire management. I know Senator Cantwell is very interested in this, as well, so hopefully this will be an area where we'll be able to make bipartisan progress.

After that, we need to look for opportunities to increase efficiencies in wildland fire operations at the federal level. The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have long coordinated aspects of their suppression programs through the National Interagency Fire Center but collaboration could still improve in procurement, budgeting, information technology, and human capital. One program to focus on is aviation services, I still do not fully understand why the Forest Service and Interior have their own separate programs.

I have also said, over and over again, that wildfire is not just a budget problem. It is a management problem – meaning we must actively manage our forests.

In Alaska, we've seen the benefits of upfront investment in hazardous fuel reduction and fuel breaks before fires start. In 2014, a large, strategically placed fuel break between the Kenai National Refuge and Soldotna saved homes and lives during the massive Funny River Fire. Then in 2015, hazardous fuel reduction treatments conducted a few years earlier around Sterling reduced the wildfire risk to that community during the Card Street Fire.

In the FY 2018 omnibus, Congress provided significant funding to address wildfires. We also provided some new authorities – not necessarily at the level that I believe necessary, but what we could characterize as a start. The agencies wanted those authorities, so we certainly expect to them to put them to good use. So, no excuses there.

I want to end by saying that to effectively fight fires and manage the lands, you must rid your agencies of sexual harassment, bullying, and retaliation. Workplace misconduct cannot be tolerated, especially on the fire lines in the field. Focus on the mission – and be professional about it – or be ready to face the consequences.

So with that, again I would like to welcome the Interim Chief of the Forest Service, Vicki Christiansen, and the Director of the Office of Wildland Fire at the Department of the Interior, Jeff Rupert, to the Committee.

I thank you both for being with us today, I look forward to our discussion today as we work to reduce wildfires across the country. Senator Cantwell?

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