



Opening Statement
Hearing on the Discussion Draft entitled
“Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Management Act”
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 23, 2016

Good morning, everyone. The hearing will come to order, as we meet to receive testimony on the legislative discussion draft entitled the *“Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Management Act.”*

I want to thank those who joined together when we released this draft on May 25—along with Ranking Member Cantwell, but Senator Wyden and Senator Crapo have been working this issue for a very long time. Senator Risch joined us on this, so a good strong team. We have taken public comments on it. And we are taking the next step today because we face serious challenges in this area that must be addressed.

People across the country are realizing that wildfires are a growing crisis. Alaskans, in particular, know how devastating wildfires can be. About half of the 10 million acres that burned last year were in my home state, and we have already seen over 200 more fires this season alone.

As fire season begins again, it’s clear that we have a real and growing problem on our hands, and resolving it will require a comprehensive solution that addresses both wildfire funding and forest management.

We need to do both, at once, because we know the wildfire problem is not just a budgeting problem – it’s also a management problem.

I’ve worked through the Appropriations process to provide temporary fixes to ensure that our firefighters and forest managers have the resources they need.

I added \$1.6 billion for wildfire suppression to last year’s Omnibus, which is \$600 million above the average cost over the past ten years—and likely enough to prevent fire borrowing this year.

Last year’s bill also included targeted increases in hazardous fuels reduction and timber programs that will help mitigate wildfire hazards and keep our forested rural economies going.

Last week we reported my Interior Appropriations bill for the next fiscal year to the full Senate. It again includes full funding for wildfire suppression and a substantial commitment to prevention and forest management efforts.

I’m proud of that work. But I will also be among the first to say that our yearly appropriations bills are temporary solutions, designed to hold us over as we developed the longer-term solution in front of us today.

Our draft bill includes a fiscally responsible fix to permanently end the destructive practice of fire borrowing, where an agency raids its non-fire programs like recreation, wildlife, and timber to pay for firefighting.

Our fix requires Congress to provide resources to the agencies upfront – enough to cover 100 percent of the average annual cost of firefighting over the past ten years – while allowing for a limited cap adjustment in truly catastrophic years.

In low fire years, we allow agencies to invest leftover suppression funds in prevention projects.

Ending fire borrowing is something that members on and off the committee have called for – and it is not just a western issue.

Just this week Senator Schumer complained that fire borrowing takes federal dollars away from efforts to fight the emerald ash borer and other invasive species in New York.

Under Secretary Bonnie told our Committee last year that fire borrowing has significant and lasting impacts across the entire Forest Service – not to mention its negative impacts on local businesses and economies.

Despite widespread agreement that we need to end this unsustainable practice, the Administration is not yet willing to embrace our bipartisan proposal to do just that. Instead, it insists that Congress should fund just 70 percent of the 10-year average of suppression costs. A proposed cap adjustment would pay for the rest, as well as any costs above the 10-year average.

Congress has rejected this idea every year it has been proposed. The Administration claims that it will use the difference between 70 percent and 100 percent for forest restoration and other measures that allow you to get ahead of the problem. Regrettably, however, the President's budget request for the Forest Service simply doesn't bear this out.

Using the 70/30 split, the Forest Service would move about \$273 million off-budget next year. But the Administration does not seek to plus-up wildland preparedness or vegetation and watershed management – those accounts are flat. It did not seek to increase forest health management on federal lands – that request is actually down. Both National Forest System budget and the Forest Service's overall budget are down – this does not comport with the reality here.

Here you can begin to see why wildfires are also a management problem.

Healthy, resilient forests are fire-resistant forests. And yet, despite knowing the value of fuel reduction treatments in mitigating wildfire risks, increasing firefighter safety, and restoring the health of our forests, active management is still often met with a series of discouraging and near insurmountable obstacles.

High upfront costs, long planning horizons, and difficult regulatory requirements are impeding our ability to implement treatments at the pace and scale that wildfires are occurring.

Our discussion draft would take steps to reduce these hurdles without abandoning important environmental protections by building on authorities within the existing Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

We focus and expedite environmental reviews by limiting the number of alternatives that need to be analyzed for collaboratively developed projects, including those contained in community wildfire protection plans.

Our bill also pilots a new emergency environmental assessment for native ponderosa pine forests, which are highly susceptible to burning, in order to reduce the risk of the large, destructive, and expensive wildfires that are unfortunately becoming the norm.

Addressing the management problem would not be complete without attention to our nation's largest national forest – the Tongass, in Southeast Alaska.

When it comes to the Tongass, I recognize that we are not always going to be in strong agreement.

But I hope we can at least agree that the transition to a program focused on predominantly young-growth timber needs to be real, and not just something that looks good on paper.

The Forest Service needs to do what's right and undertake what the Tongass Advisory Committee called for in its recommendations – a comprehensive, stand-level inventory to address the uncertainties that exist in the supply, volume, and timing of the availability of young-growth to support a transition.

On January 21 of this year, the TAC reiterated the importance of an inventory, calling it the number one priority investment – because modeling is not good enough for a clear picture of when young growth will come online.

A successful transition will only be possible if it is grounded in strong science and backed by comprehensive data.

The point of our Tongass provision is not to delay the transition that is already underway, but to allow a meaningful inventory to take place before the land plan is amended.

The last thing I want to highlight is our emphasis on federal engagement with state and local fire agencies and other partners. This is critical to mitigate risk to communities, and to manage and respond to wildfires. The investments we authorize will help communities become fire-adapted, which is an important piece of the solution to escalating wildfire suppression costs in the Wildland-Urban Interface.

I want to close by thanking my colleagues for working with us on this discussion draft. I intend to advance it to the Senate floor as soon as possible. I hope the members of our committee will recognize what is at stake here, and join me in that effort.

With that I turn to Senator Cantwell.