



**Opening Statement**  
**Hearing on the Forest Service's FY 2017 Budget Request**  
**Chairman Lisa Murkowski**  
**March 8, 2016**

Good morning, everyone. The hearing will come to order, as we meet to review the President's request for the Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2017.

Chief Tidwell, we appreciate you being here to explain this proposal, although it will come as no surprise that I am troubled by many aspects of it.

To start, this budget proposes a number of mandatory spending proposals without providing any offsets. The Secure Rural Schools program, commonly called "SRS," is an example.

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. That's unacceptable. The timber industry can be sustainable, but the funding required for SRS without offsets, and in the absence of timber harvesting, is not.

We have many communities around the country, particularly in the West, that are dependent economically on the active management of our national forests.

As you know, Southeast Alaska is full of such communities. And there is not much in this budget request for them.

On the Tongass, the Secretary of Agriculture has directed the Forest Service to expedite a transition away from old-growth timber harvesting towards a timber program focused on predominantly young-growth.

This is a Secretarial mandate. It will fundamentally change the way the Tongass is managed. And yet, there is no mention of the transition in this budget to explain how it will be executed and how it will be funded.

That was a surprise and a disappointment. But it hasn't stopped the Forest Service from moving on a plan amendment to lock in this transition before this Administration leaves office.

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

A successful transition will only be possible if it is grounded in strong science and backed by comprehensive data. And as a starting point, as a matter of common sense, we need a complete inventory before we allow a plan amendment to move forward.

In the meantime, it is critical that the Forest Service provide enough timber to meet market demand, because if you fail to do that, there won't be any timber industry left to transition.

Another issue that needs to be discussed is how this budget proposes to address the wildfire problem.

Again, the Forest Service budget asks Congress to fund just 70 percent of the 10-year average of suppression costs. A proposed cap adjustment would pay for the remaining 30 percent, as well as any costs above the 10-year average.

This idea has been rejected every year since it was first proposed in the FY 2015 budget.

There just isn't agreement here in Congress on whether or how to address what this proposal is aimed at – the growth of fire programs as a percentage of the Forest Service's annual budget.

What we do agree on is putting an end to the unsustainable practice of fire borrowing. We cannot continue to fight fires by diverting funds from other parts of the Forest Service's budget.

That is why last year I fought to include wildfire provisions in the omnibus that are both responsible and pragmatic. The bill includes \$1.6 billion for fire suppression, which is \$600 million above the average cost of fighting wildfire over the past ten years. It includes \$545 million for hazardous fuels reduction. And it includes \$360 million for the Forest Service's timber program, which will help us begin to resume the active management of our forests.

Barring a truly record setting fire season in 2016, fire borrowing should not be an issue for the rest of this fiscal year.

That gives us some time to advance legislation that addresses wildfire budgeting *and* how we manage our forests.

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.

High upfront costs, long planning horizons, and regulatory requirements – including what seem like unending environmental reviews – are impeding our ability to implement treatments at the pace and scale that wildfires are occurring. We must also work with our state agencies, local communities, and the public to increase community preparedness and install fire breaks to break up fuel connectivity to keep fires small.

In Alaska, we have a vested interest in getting this right. About half of the 10 million acres that burned in the 2015 wildfire season were in my home state. And we have already seen our second wildfire in 2016.

I'm eager to work with you, Chief, and the members of our committee and the other committees that have a role on this issue. We have real challenges that will only grow worse if we fail to address them. I look forward to working with you to address these challenges and others.

I'll now turn to Ranking Member Cantwell.

###