

**Chairman Manchin's Opening Remarks During
a Full Committee Hearing to Examine the
Federal Response to Escalating Wildfires and to
Evaluate Reforms to Land Management and
Wildland Firefighter Recruitment and Retention**

- The committee will come to order.
- This morning we are here to discuss the Federal response to escalating wildfires.
- As it so happens, wildfire smoke from the wildfires burning right now in Canada has been affecting the skies here Washington, DC this week.
- Some of my colleagues on the Committee, particularly those from the Western states, have much more first-hand experience with the impact of wildfires.
- Those impacts are numerous and range from devastating loss of life and property to air pollution.

- For example, the Government Accountability Office recently reported that smoke from US wildfires now makes up 30 percent of the United States emissions of particulates.
- And things aren't improving.
- In fact, in the last two decades, the top four largest wildfires in human history have occurred—in both the northern and southern hemisphere.
- In the US, more than half of the most destructive wildfires in our history have occurred since 2018.
- Also, the acres burned annually have doubled in the past 30 years and are forecast to double again in the next 30 years.
- Our committee has discussed at length the impacts of climate conditions and past mismanagement of our forests that has ushered in a new era of fuels and wildfires.
- We've essentially created a perfect storm and as a result have witnessed an increase in the

occurrence of mega-fires with communities across the West suffering from tragic loss of life and property.

- While agency leaders have talked about correcting this course for some time, it unfortunately seems that with each passing year, we continue to slip farther behind.

Firefighting Workforce

- Because most of our Committee members are now intimately familiar with the causes and impacts of wildfires, we are going to spend much of our time this morning focusing on the firefighter workforce.
- As we are at the beginning of the fire season for a large part of the US, let me first take a moment to thank all of the Federal wildland firefighters for their service.
- These men and women bravely serve our country day-in and day-out, working long, grueling hours in a dangerous job.

- Despite the risk, they choose to continue to serve, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude and our support.
- My staff and Ranking Member Barrasso's staff have been talking directly with wildland firefighters and their family members, as well as several firefighter organizations, to ensure we fully understand what Federal wildland firefighters are experiencing and how we can improve Federal capacity.
- We are particularly grateful to the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters and the National Federation of Federal Employees for working with us to ensure we understand the issues permeating the workforce as well as the pros and cons of potential solutions.
- Over the last two years, Congress has provided record levels of funding – over \$10 billion – to help the Federal agencies achieve a paradigm shift in the way they manage the wildland firefighting workforce and our public lands.

- I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the bottlenecks the agencies are facing because we must get to work at changing the status quo.
- Not only is the safety of our communities and health of our forests and the safety of our communities at stake, but also the lives of the men and women who serve in our fire service.

Workforce Proposals

- There are several proposals existing today that offer some creative, commonsense solutions for addressing the problems facing our firefighting workforce.
- For example, last year Ranking Member Barrasso and I introduced *the Promoting Effective Forest Management Act*, which directs

the agencies to undertake a range of activities aimed at reducing fire risk on Federal lands.

- The bill also significantly modifies a current Federal policy related to retirement benefits for firefighters.
- In previous hearings, we've discussed how if a Federal firefighter has longer than a 3-day break in service over a 20-year career, he—or more often she—unconscionably must forfeit previously made retirement contributions.
- This is a policy that is impacting our workforce and needs to be fixed.
- Also, I wanted to acknowledge that the Administration submitted a legislative proposal with its Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request which would reform the way Federal firefighters are paid.
- While this is a complicated issue, it is clear a great deal of thought and effort went into this proposal—and I greatly appreciate that and

believe we need to do the work to ensure we get whatever the solution is right.

- I am sure we will discuss both of these in more detail this morning as our Committee looks at ways to increase retention in our shrinking wildland firefighting workforce.
- I want to thank our witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to hearing your perspectives on the situation we find ourselves in with wildfires and with our firefighters as well as your perspectives on potential solutions.
- With that, I'll turn it over to Ranking Member Barrasso for his opening statement.
- Thank you, Senator Barrasso.
- We have a great panel assembled this morning.
- Today we have:
 - Mr. Jeff Rupert from the Department of the Interior's Office of Wildland Fire;
 - Deputy Chief Jaelith Hall-Rivera from the Forest Service;

- Ms. Kelly Norris, the interim State Forester of Wyoming;
- And finally, Mr. Cardell Johnson from the Government Accountability Office.
- Mr. Rupert, we'll begin with your opening remarks.
- Next, we'll go to Deputy Chief Hall Rivera
- Ms. Kelly Norris.
- And Mr. Johnson.
- Thank you again for being available to share your expertise. We'll now begin with questions.