



**Opening Statement: Oversight Hearing on Wildfire  
Senator Lisa Murkowski  
November 17, 2015**

The 2015 fire season was a tragic one, punctuated by fatalities.

We lost residents who could not escape the flames, and brave firefighters who gave their lives to keep our communities safe. The Okanogan Complex fire in Washington claimed the lives of three heroes – Thomas Zbyszewski, Andrew Zajac, and Richard Wheeler.

And I want to start by acknowledging them and offering prayers to their families.

Each year the wildfire season seems to include new “worsts” and historical records. For its part, 2015 has been marked by a relentless wildfire season that has stretched nearly all year. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, more than 9.4 million acres have burned through October 30.

This year’s season is among the most devastating years for wildfires since reliable records began in 1960 – coming close to 2006, when an all-time high of nearly 9.9 million acres burned.

Megafires – which are fires over 100,000 acres in size, and incomprehensible just decades ago – are becoming the new norm. Five megafires were burning at the same time in September alone.

The majority of our nation’s fires continue to occur in my state of Alaska, and this year was no exception. We had over five million acres burned in my home state. This is an area the size of Connecticut. Only the 2004 fire season, where nearly 6.6 million acres burned, was worse for us.

This year, the fire season in Alaska was also unique. And also not in a good way.

We didn’t have much snow over the winter and the spring featured record warm temperatures, creating unusually dry conditions and then came the lightning. On one day alone, near the summer solstice, lightning struck our state around 15,000 times – so over 15,000 strikes in one day. Ultimately, lightning caused more than half of the more than 700 fires in Alaska this season.

At one point this summer more than 200 fires were burning in the state, all over the state, all at once. Numerous Native Alaskan villages were evacuated because of fires that threatened air quality and structures. The thick smoke in Fairbanks pushed air quality to hazardous levels, forcing outdoor activities to be canceled. Dozens of homes north and south of Anchorage were lost.

Alaska spent 24 days at preparedness level 5, the highest level. And you all on the panel clearly know what level 5 is but for those who are unfamiliar, it is the highest level. These wildfires drained budgets and required so much manpower to battle that officials enlisted the help of international crews at times.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution. We cannot simply match the increasing wildfire threat with greater and greater suppression force, and call it a day. Wildfire suppression and its escalating costs are economically, ecologically, and socially unsustainable. And the 2015 fire season underscores that point.

While what we must recognize is that many of the same factors that are increasing the size, frequency, and intensity of wildfires are also driving up wildfire suppression costs, both in actual dollars and as a portion of the Forest Service's total budget.

These factors include:

- Excessive fuel loads due, in part, to decades of fire exclusion;
- Changing climate;
- Insect and disease infestation;
- Severe drought;
- The spread of invasive species; and
- An expanding Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

But that's not all. Operational factors associated with wildfire management – our objectives, strategies, and tactics – all have significant cost implications and this includes the aviation assets that we deploy today.

We spent \$2.1 billion fighting fires this season and \$4.2 billion in total on wildfire management, and it's not even clear where the money was spent and whether those dollars were well spent. That's due in part to the fact that the agencies don't bother to conduct reviews of the large, expensive fires.

The Forest Service has claimed that the wildfire problem is a budget problem, but that's probably an oversimplification. We all agree that Congress must end the practice of fire borrowing, but we can't just throw money at this problem.

In the Interior Appropriations subcommittee, where I serve as chairman, we provide, in the Interior Appropriations bill, a fiscally responsible approach to end fire borrowing. It would budget for 100 percent of the ten-year average for fire suppression and provide a limited emergency reserve or contingency fund for firefighting in above average years.

I think that's part of the solution. But the wildfire problem is not just a budgeting problem – it's also a management problem.

And we have failed to appropriately manage our fire-dependent forests and fire-prone landscapes, and that has predisposed our forests to megafires.

We must work with our state agencies, our local communities, and the public to increase community preparedness and make our forests healthy again.

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 regulatory environment requirements – including what seem like unending environmental reviews – are impeding our ability to implement treatments at the pace and scale these wildfires are occurring.

These are big problems that will take cooperation and commitment to solve. So Senator Cantwell and I have agreed to work together – and with other members of this committee – to develop a better wildfire management strategy for our country.

I think it's fair to say that Senator Cantwell and I share the view that is strategy should be guided by the following principles. And the principles include:

- Responsibly funding wildfire suppression;
- Ending the unsustainable practice of fire borrowing;
- Improving operational efficiencies to ensure the availability and effectiveness of the aviation fleet and firefighter safety;
- Increasing community preparedness through firewise activities and implementing community wildfire protection plans;
- Making the necessary investments in a full array of fuel treatments to include not just prescribed fire but also mechanical thinning;
- Increasing the use of technology on wildfires; and
- Reducing paperwork to get needed projects implemented in a timely manner.

We know that type of strategy is necessary because we have just endured another terrible fire season that affected many of our home states – many of the people that we know, and many of the lands and landscapes that we treasure. So this is not just any Tuesday morning here at the Energy Committee. This cannot be a review without a purpose, where we turn the page, or close the book, and consider our responsibilities met for another year. We've got a lot of work to do. And we need to work together to develop real solutions to the wildfire problem.

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