



Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on Improving Forest Health & Socioeconomic Opportunities
March 24, 2015

“Mr. Bonnie, I want to thank you for coming today to talk to about the U.S. Forest Service. I believe this is your first time appearing before the committee, in your role as undersecretary.

“I also want to recognize Dwayne Vaagen, who is here from the Pacific Northwest. Mr. Vaagen lives in Colville, Washington, and has experience partnering with the Forest Service on many of its restoration initiatives, and has been a leader for our region. So, thank you for being here today.

“I want to start by reflecting on the lawmakers of the 1960s and 1970s. These members saw the problems that were being created by the way the federal government was managing our forests. And they set out to fix them. They passed the most sweeping reforms of the 20th century, and we really haven’t seen anything like it since.

“In recent years, I’ve seen a lot of attempts to fix various problems in a piecemeal fashion. But what’s really needed is a 21st Century management plan. We need a strategy that will improve the health of our national forests, conserve important areas and encourage recreation. Public input needs to be unambiguous in this plan.

“Most of us would agree that our national forests are in bad shape. One hundred years of fire suppression has left our national forests prone to catastrophic wildfires. Decades of clear-cutting have left the overall structure of our national forests unbalanced. In many places, habitat for our threatened and endangered species is in short supply.

“Here are a few sobering facts:

- Over the last decade, bark beetles destroyed 32 million acres of the 193 million acres managed by the Forest Service.
- The National Forest Service’s latest disease model shows that another 37 million acres of the National Forests will die from disease before 2027.

- Here's another one. Another model shows that 58 million acres are at high risk of imminent burning in a catastrophic fire.

"As we talk about this, we'll need to assess how much of these percentages are related to a lack of management and how many are made more difficult by the changing climates.

"So how do we move forward? That's obviously the topic of today's hearing.

"We have serious challenges, and we need to address them in a shorter amount of time than the 100 years that it took us to get to this place. We need to be more efficient in ways to manage and restore our forests.

"To do that, the Forest Service needs to use management approaches that are different from the approaches of the last century, and previous approaches that have created the conditions today.

"In the last few years, we have seen restoration efforts take hold when the Forest Service has collaborated with stakeholders.

"I want to say, collaboration on watershed issues have been particularly important in the Pacific Northwest, where salmon receives and deserves so much attention. These collaborations around watershed management have been very helpful.

"Now, restoration projects need funding to move forward. As such, markets for forest products are critically important to the success of these projects. To expand forest restoration efforts, we need to expand markets. We have to figure out how to generate moderate-value products from low-value wood. And [how to] generate them at scales large enough to reduce the increasing devastation of wildfires. The increased use of cross-laminated timber and wood pellets could provide us with such an opportunity.

"I will say that the Forest Service really needs to also use different technologies. One example worth highlighting – just because later today we are also having a hearing in the Commerce Committee on this – one example is drones. Multiple organizations now have developed drones that can be used to reforest areas. Each of these drones would be able to plant about 36,000 trees per day, at 10 percent of the Forest Service's cost. After the devastating wildfires, like we had at the Carlton Complex, there's a need to stabilize and restore these areas.

"Overall, the Forest Service is working hard to restore the health of the forests. But, we can't try to measure the agency's success only in the amount harvested. We need to look at other things as well. The Forest Service must keep mills nearby. I've already talked about the importance of markets. But we also need to make sure we talk about stewardship and access to some of these smaller mills.

"Recreation on National Forests contributes \$13 billion to the economy, about 40 percent of the contribution to the economy.

"In conversations that will be unfolding, I believe recreation also deserves consideration in revitalizing and expanding recreation on our national forests. We had a hearing earlier about this and had a lot of questions for the Forest Service on just how difficult or

challenging it is for youth organizations to get access to our Forest Service lands without permits. So I think we need to look at that.

“We all know that wildfires are probably the biggest problem facing the forest every summer. That’s why, with Chairman Murkowski’s help and my colleague Senator “Wyden, with whom I am happy to have co-sponsored his legislation, would do just that more squarely and hopefully put more resources at play to help us manage this.

“Finally, I want to reiterate the importance of the public’s input in management decisions. This has been very important.

“Within any bill from this committee, I want to make sure that we continue to streamline the process but also allow input. It must remain a major building block of how we manage our public lands.

“Thank you, Madam Chairman for this important hearing and thank you again to all the witnesses.”

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