

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing to Review Federal Wildland Management Strategies November 17, 2015

“Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this important hearing. And thank you to the witnesses for coming today, we look forward to hearing from all of you. I also want to thank the chair for allowing us to do a field hearing last August in Seattle, Washington, that our colleague Senator Barrasso came out for. And we certainly appreciate both the field hearing and him joining us for that.

“We learned many things from the hearings that we’ve had so far and we are going to learn more today.

“We have learned that there are actions that agencies can take and that communities can take to decrease the risk of wildfires. We learned about the benefits of creating a surge capacity to respond in these cases when we do have extreme events. But what most stood out most for me, from one of the witnesses that we had in Seattle, Dr. Medler from Western Washington University, was that he explained that we have not seen the worst of these fires yet. This is something that requires immediate action.

“I want to thank Jon Wyss and Chief Burnett for being here today from the state of Washington. These two people are intimately familiar with the issues surrounding wildfire, particularly given our experiences over the past two summers.

“In 2014, my state experienced its largest and worst wildfire in history—the Carlton Complex.

“So, earlier this year when this committee began our work on fire and were discussing what we had learned from that tragedy, we scheduled listening sessions across the state of Washington about what the federal government could do better help local communities.

“But what we didn’t realize at the time when we started scheduling those listening sessions was that the fire season of 2015 was going to be an even more dramatic fire season.

“Almost one million acres in my state burned in about a month—that’s an area the size of Delaware. In addition to the severe economic losses to the timber industry, the recreation economy and the tribes, the firefighters of Washington state would also suffer the tragic loss of life. These impacts are unbelievable.



“I want to say that the three Forest Service firefighters that were killed in the line of duty while protecting the communities in which they lived were the best among us:

- Andrew Zajac,
- Richard Wheeler and
- Tom Zbyszewski.

“And a fourth firefighter, Daniel Lyon, was severely burned in the entrapment and has been going through recovery.

“So clearly 2015 was a tragedy.

“As I travelled across the state and looked at various issues, I’ve heard compelling stories about firefighters, business owners and residents who lost their homes or had to evacuate about what we needed to do to do better.

“Firefighters, county commissioners, Forest Service staff and legislators all came forward with issues about coordination, response, making sure that fewer homes burned, making sure our firefighters are safer and proactively decreasing the intensity of these fires so they can be better managed.

“I know many of my colleagues present today have also experienced similar fire seasons in their states, such as Chairman Murkowski just mentioned.

“Unfortunately, there are only so many spots available at the witness table, but I’m sure that everyone of us could fill a whole table with people from our state who are stakeholders in this discussion.

“So before we begin, I would like to recognize a couple people who aren’t at the table. From Aero-Flite— Mike, if he is here, would he wave his hand? Aero-Flite is a company that is in Spokane, Washington and their airtanker fleet is very important to how we fight fires, continuing to improve that service with the Forest Service.

“And I want to recognize Brian Gunn from the Colville tribe, who is also here. This summer, wildfires spread onto their reservation and destroyed 20 percent of their timber. A quarter of the tribe’s economy is generated from timber, so to say that is a big deal is an understatement. They lost upwards of \$1 billion of standing timber.



“This hearing is the third in our committee that we’ve had so far on wildfires in 2015. I’m pretty sure this makes a record for the committee. I think it shows that we are serious about getting something done.

“And I want to thank Senator Murkowski for outlining some of the things that she and I believe that should be in a bill:

- Ending the practice of fire borrowing, so that we can actually do more in the way of prevention and preparedness upfront;
- Improving the efficiency of our operations, ensuring that firefighters have the best equipment and those in communities that are challenged with how broad the map has become have every resource available to them;
- Increasing community preparedness, through activities such as FireWise® and risk-mapping;
- Investing in fuels treatments that we know make a difference, such as prescribed fires and mechanical thinning – Dr. Covington, I can’t wait to hear from you on this issue particularly because I’m very interested and will show some maps about thinning success in Washington state and where it mattered in prevention; and
- Increasing our use of technology, including unmanned aerial vehicles, to give us more information and for us in the central part of the state, it’s clear we need a new Doppler system to talk about high-wind incidents, which we certainly experienced the day that our firefighters lost their lives.

“So all of these are very important issues and I am pleased to be working with the chair on this. We’ve also had many conversations with our colleague Congresswoman Cathy McMorris-Rodgers in the House of Representatives, because her legislative district has been front and center in all of this.

“And I also want to say that I know we put out a white paper that we’ve discussed in a Seattle hearing, and there are many inputs that we have received, along with what we’re going to hear today.

“I hope, Madam Chair, that all of us on this committee of Western states can work together because I think we see that we do not want to face the 2016 fire season without better tools,



without better processes and without better operations to help our communities and help our states. Thank you very much.”

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