

**Chairman Manchin's Opening Remarks During
a Full Committee Hearing to Examine the
Findings and Recommendations of the Wildland
Fire Mitigation and Management Commission**

- The committee will come to order.
- This morning we're going to be discussing the findings and recommendations that recently came out of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission.
- The Commission was created by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, taken from a bill sponsored by Senators Romney and Kelly. The 50-person Commission was co-chaired by FEMA and the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior.
- Its directive was to recommend policies to improve federal forest and wildfire management.
- Over the course of a year, they examined everything from active forest management to contracts for firefighting aircraft and came up with 167 unanimous recommendations.

- We're going to focus on recommendations targeted at the federal land management agencies, and our witnesses represent a cross-section of the diverse topics explored by the Commission.
- To set the scene, even though it's only March, we have already had record-breaking wildfires in the U.S.
- The Smokehouse Creek wildfire two weeks ago in Texas scorched more than one million acres, killing 2 people and destroying hundreds of homes.
- This was the largest wildfire in Texas history, and it happened in February – it literally snowed while the fire was still raging.
- This isn't and shouldn't be normal, but wildfires are now breaking records every year.
- The severity of these fires has also become a significant drain on U.S. resources and

productivity, even beyond the devastating loss of life and property.

- For starters, U.S. spending on fire suppression has increased by 300 percent since the 1980's, even after accounting for inflation.
- Wildfires also slow down business and tourism, and severely burned landscapes filter less water, store less carbon, and transport more sediment to our streams and reservoirs.
- The National Institute of Standards and Technology attempted to quantify the economic impact of these fires in 2017 and found that the costs and losses could exceed \$400 billion dollars per year.
- I know that my colleagues on the Committee, particularly those from Western states, are all too familiar with these statistics and the terrible tragedies that accompany severe wildfire.
- Congress, however, has taken some action to get our forests back to a healthier condition.

- Between the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, federal land management agencies will receive over \$24 billion dollars.
- These laws also included some commonsense reforms, like streamlining the permitting for fuel breaks near communities.
- They also provided the brave men and women serving as federal wildland firefighters with a temporary pay supplement to better reflect the critical, but dangerous, job they perform.
- I want to thank all 50 members of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission for their time and effort spent studying this issue and providing us with options to further improve our forest and wildfire management practices.
- Clearly, with 167 recommendations, you discovered plenty of issues and your conversations generated plenty of ideas.

- Some of these were topics that our Committee has covered in past hearings, or that have existing legislative proposals in Congress to address them.
- For example, the Commission noted that many areas with high fire risk are characterized by small-diameter, low-value trees.
- Expanding the universe of wood products made from small-diameter timber could radically expand the areas where thinning treatments are both necessary and profitable.
- A bill that I introduced with Ranking Member Barrasso last year, the *America's Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act*, would do just that.
- The Commission also noted the need to fix a problem related to firefighter retirement benefits that our Committee has discussed before.
- Currently, if a firefighter takes a break of more than 3 days during a twenty-year career, that

firefighter gives up their special retirement benefits.

- Ranking Member Barrasso and I have worked on another bill together, the *Promoting Effective Forest Management Act*, which would fix this problem.
- Bipartisan, common-sense solutions to these problems exist, and I look forward to hearing ideas from my colleagues on how we can address the recommendations from the Commission this morning.
- Since the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior served as co-chairs of the panel, I am also interested to hear what administrative changes the agencies are considering as a result of these reports.
- The report drove home the need to return low-intensity fires in many areas, and I know the

agencies conducted a record-high number of prescribed burns last year.

- What's less clear is whether those burns were in areas with the highest wildfire risk.
- The Commission encouraged the agencies to adopt region-specific prescribed fire targets to better track actual hazardous fuels reduction.
- Tucked in at the end of the wildfire report is a recommendation to overhaul the way the agencies report their treatment metrics and, hopefully, stop double- or triple-counting acres.
- Since these recommendations were unanimously adopted, I hope this means that the agencies finally accept that they need to provide more transparency on how appropriated dollars translate into on-the-ground work.

- So let me just thank our witnesses for being here today, as well as the Commission's coordinators for their work to make this happen.
- I look forward to hearing your perspectives on these issues.
- With that, I'll turn it over to Ranking Member Barrasso for his opening statement.

- Thank you, Ranking Member Barrasso.
- Our witnesses today include diverse stakeholders, including several who participated in the Commission.
- We have:
 - Ms. Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the Department of Agriculture;
 - Ms. Joan Mooney, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management,

and Budget at the Department of the Interior;

- Mr. Cody Desautel, Executive Director for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and the President of the Intertribal Timber Council;
 - Ms. Madelene McDonald, Senior Watershed Scientist at Denver Water;
 - And finally, Ms. Kelly Norris, the Wyoming State Forester.
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- Before we turn to our witnesses for their opening remarks, I understand Ranking Member Barrasso would like to introduce one of our witnesses.
 - Now to witness opening remarks.
 - Ms. Harrell, we'll begin with you.
 - Thank you. Next, we'll go to Ms. Mooney
 - Thank you. Next is Mr. Desautel

- And now to Ms. McDonald
- And finally, Ms. Norris
- Thank you again to our witnesses for being here and for your testimony. We'll now begin with questions.