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November 13, 2015

To: U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

From: Fire Chief Mike Burnett, Chelan County Fire District 1

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Committee Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. It is an honor to represent the perspective of local fire chiefs in this extremely important discussion. In order to improve future wildland fire management strategies, the choices we make as individuals and at all levels of government need to be modified. It has been noted by experts in the field that fires are becoming more frequent with increased size and intensity. To address this fact we need to:

- Allow natural fire on the landscape where it is not a threat to people and homes.
- Increase education and prevention.
 - Enact codes and building standards for construction in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).
 - Create incentives for homeowners to “fire harden” their homes.
 - Allocate funds and resources to increase education and prevention efforts.
- Allow, and fund, prescribed fires and fuel reduction efforts.
- Aggressively fight the fires when they first start in order to keep them smaller and less expensive.
- Better utilization of air resources.
- Reprioritization of federal grants.

The recommended solutions from subject matter experts will vary based on the individual’s perception of the problem; facts are facts, but perception is reality. My desire today is to inform you of my perception, and hopefully add to the discussion, in order to frame a more common reality.

I am a fire chief in North Central Washington, which is home to Leavenworth, Chelan, Pateros, Brewster, and Wenatchee. Our area lost over 400 homes to wildfire in the last two fire seasons. Even more devastating is the loss of three firefighters who died this year trying to escape a fast moving fire outside of the town of Twisp. Chelan County Fire District 1 (CCFD1) is a combination fire department, which means we staff our stations with a combination of both career and volunteer firefighters. CCFD1 encompasses the largest town in the area, the City of Wenatchee, and our entire jurisdictional boundary is truly WUI country. Our annual budget is approximately \$6 million, which is more than twice any other fire district in the area. In the two neighboring counties, there are only 48 career firefighters. Of those firefighters, 11 are typically on duty at any given time with seven of them from CCFD1. We, like many fire departments across the country, rely heavily on the support of volunteers to aid in the protection of our communities.

I am also fortunate enough to participate on one of the 16 National Type 1 Incident Management Teams (IMT) as the Planning Section Chief. These teams are geographically located throughout the country and are deployed to incidents of national significance with the highest level of complexity. This experience has allowed me to aid other communities in their battles against wildfires and has given me a better understanding of the values, complexities, and restraints of fighting wildfires where multiple agencies and

jurisdictions are involved. On the less positive side, there are frequently competing interests, differing policies, and cost allocation issues. On the positive side, sharing of resources, combining of expertise, funding of aircraft, and development of common objectives are all extremely valuable to citizens.

Every year, North Central Washington experiences a very active fire season. The intensity and duration of our fires has been increasing over the last few years. In 2014, the Carlton Complex alone burned over 250,000 acres and destroyed over 300 homes. In 2015, over 900,000 acres burned with the largest fires being:

- Chelan Complex – 88,985 acres
- Carpenter Road – 63,972 acres
- Okanogan Complex – 133,450 acres
- North Star – 218,138 acres
- Tunk Block Fire – 165,918 acres
- Wolverine – 65,512 acres
- Kettle Complex – 73,392 acres

Thousands of firefighters were deployed and hundreds of millions of dollars spent, yet we still lost hundreds of structures and most importantly, we lost the lives of three young men.

This past fire season started for us in June following multiple days of 100+ degree temperatures. On June 28th at 2:16 in the afternoon, a small human-caused fire was reported at the base of a hill. The fire was very visible from the nearby highway and our 911 center received multiple reports of the fire. The fire, named the Sleepy Hollow Fire, ultimately grew to 2,950 acres. The initial response came from local fire districts; all volunteer resources with one engine staffed with career firefighters. The initial attack incident commander (IC) requested additional local resources and notified our State and Federal partners: Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Okanogan/Wenatchee National Forest (FS). By 4:00pm, the IC had called for a second alarm response, followed by a third alarm, which dispatches all of the predetermined resources in our region. He also had the Duty Officers from DNR and the FS on site assisting with coordinating efforts. Throughout the afternoon, firefighters worked in triple digit temperatures and were successful in protecting over 50 primary residences directly threatened by the fire in the Sleepy Hollow neighborhood. The fire travelled a little more than a mile in five hours, at which time we experienced an increase in wind and fire behavior. This caused the fire to travel an additional mile in about one hour. Unfortunately, at the end of that mile was a housing development built on top of a steep ravine, which was loaded with old-growth sagebrush. This resulted in the destruction of 30 homes. The fire also spotted more than a mile away into a commercial warehouse district. The spot-fire took hold on a roof of a chemical warehouse and then spread to the roofs of two additional fruit packing warehouses. Late into the evening, every available engine was assigned to the incident. For several hours, the only fire protection left for our area was a Crash Rescue truck from the airport. The estimated direct economic loss was over \$110 million dollars. Indirect, long-term losses to the community have yet to be determined.

Chelan County's next tragic event occurred on August 14 just outside of the town of Lake Chelan. A lightning-caused fire was reported on the hill behind the town. Shortly thereafter, several additional fires were reported in the area. These fires eventually became the Chelan Complex, which covered 88,985 acres. Within hours of the first report of the fire, homes were being lost. Over the next 24 hours, 51 structures and 3 fruit packing warehouses were destroyed by fire.

Both of the fires described above, and the vast majority of fires in our region, are similar in nature;

- The destroyed homes are inside of a fire protection district, or city, which is surrounded by State or Federal ground.

- The fires start near an interface area and quickly threaten structures.
- The fire departments lack the funding to pay for air resources and the early use of air resources may have made a difference.
- There are firefighters on scene in a short period of time but the fires quickly overrun the capacity of a rural volunteer, or combination, fire department.
- State and Federal resources engage, but due to their primary responsibilities as wildland firefighters, they are slower to react to urban interface fires, limited on initial attack capabilities, and are not as suited for structure protection.
- Most of the homes are in vulnerable locations and are not fire hardened through building materials, design, or landscape modifications.

Beside the Sleepy Hollow Fire, and multiple smaller fires within our fire district, I was deployed with our IMT to the Newby Lake Fire, which was the fire that started in Canada and grew into northern Washington. Later the IMT was deployed on a 30-day assignment, first to the National Creek Complex in the Crater Lake National Park followed by a reassignment to the North Star Fire and the Tunk Block Fire in North Central Washington. In all cases, the basic objectives were the same; protect life and property, minimize acres burned, utilize cost containment best practices, enhance relationships with the community and stakeholders, and at all times base actions on a deliberate risk assessment.

There has been a continuous effort to improve fighting wildfires in our region. We have improved the working relationship between all government agencies. Our local fire districts have a standardized Cooperators Agreement with the Okanogan/Wenatchee National Forest. Radio frequencies are standardized to improve our communication capabilities. Wildland certifications are reviewed and approved by a multijurisdictional panel with representation from DNR, FS, BLM, and local fire districts. Annual training is conducted for all agencies utilizing a mixed cadre from all disciplines. We hold bi-monthly meetings for all North Central Washington fire agencies including BLM, FS, and DNR. Yet, even with these practices in place, changing environmental conditions and increasing fire behavior make it imperative that we work collaboratively with partners and increase our community-wide efforts.

There is a growing awareness that our community needs to do more to educate and inform residents on how to live with wildfires. Chelan County has two established wildfire coalitions, Forest Ridge outside of Wenatchee and the Chumstick outside of Leavenworth. Recently, active community members came together to put on the "Wildfire and Us Summit" in Wenatchee. The summit was dedicated to exploring what can be done by everyone involved: landowners, cities and counties, and state and federal agencies. The goal was to develop a comprehensive, cooperative, and collaborative regional approach to reduce the risks of wildfire loss. The event was free to the public and an estimated 500 people attended. With the increase of severe wildfires, a conscious education effort like this Summit, and programs like Firewise, more neighborhoods are asking what they can do to make their area a Fire Adapted Community.

Partnerships between the fire districts and their communities are improving. Forest Ridge Wildfire Coalition (FRWC) and CCFD1 have worked together to obtain grant funding for fuel reduction projects. DNR has provided cost share grants for chipping projects. CCFD1 attends the FRWC board meetings and participates in their Firewise Community efforts. A direct alert system to their board members has been established to facilitate rapid information transfer and evacuation. This system has been utilized several times for fire information and evacuation notices.

From my perspective, there is still work to be done and areas that need to be strengthened. I believe in order to improve our ability to respond to the negative impacts of wildfire we need to address these issues:

- Increased education and prevention.
- Continued fuel reduction.
- Quicker initial attack.
- Better utilization of air resources.
- Reprioritization of federal grants.

In order to change the public's perception of wildfire and their involvement in the problem, we will need to increase our education and prevention efforts. Utilizing the "3-E's", Educate, Engineer, and Enforce, over time we can change behavior and attitudes; seatbelts are an excellent example. The construction industry has already engineered building materials and improved construction methods to make the home more fire resilient. We also have the WUI Codes from the International Code Council. Communities need to adopt those codes and enforce those standards (the City of Wenatchee adopted them in 2011).

Homeowners make a conscious decision to build in the WUI and therefore need to take appropriate action to make their home more fire resilient. It is also our responsibility to educate that same homeowner on concepts such as: not all fire is bad, there will be times in the spring when we put smoke in the air through prescribed burns, we will not risk lives to save your home, and there are resources available to you to help make your home more defensible.

Our firefighters are part of our community. They are trusted, respected, and capable of providing the education to the public. The problem is most rural fire districts have limited staffing due to funding. The Sleepy Hollow Fire referenced earlier had approximately 150 firefighters assigned to the fire, of which 120 of them were volunteers. With very few career personnel available, the workload is focused on emergency response as opposed to proactive prevention. Any targeted federal funding to support a wildfire education and prevention program would pay substantial dividends. Training local firefighters to perform home assessments, cost shares on hardening homes (i.e. - changing out shake roofs), conducting evacuation preparedness drills, and education on the value of beneficial fires, are all examples of a good prevention program. The value of a prepared community translates directly to a safer environment for firefighters!

We need to continue fuel modification efforts. A portion of this effort involves correcting perceptions that fuel modification is a “scam” by the government to harvest more trees or that government employees are not able to perform the operation safely. Fuel modification in the form of prescribed burns or shaded fuel breaks have proven to be effective in reducing the spread of wildfire. A treated area does not stop the fire but it can give us a chance to catch the fire. For example: over the last decade, the FS performed fuel treatments followed by prescribed burns around the Beehive Reservoir area just outside of Wenatchee. During the 2012 Wenatchee Complex there were over 60 fires burning. One of the larger fires was the Peavine Fire at over 19,000 acres. Fire personnel utilized this treatment area to safely control the perimeter of the fire heading towards the Forest Ridge subdivision less than two miles away.

The initial attack is the best opportunity to catch a fire; statically most fires are caught on initial attack. From the perspective of a local fire chief, our initial attack response time is measured in minutes, and catching wildfires is measured in hours. The perspective of a wildland agency is different. The initial attack response time is measured in hours, and a fire being caught is measured in days. Local jurisdictions need resources available to them much quicker than the wildland agencies are currently able to provide. If a local fire district is involved in a wildland fire there will be a WUI component, and the option to not suppress the fire will not exist. We need more funding for seasonal firefighters to be available on a local level so the initial attack can be more robust and more rapid. We also need additional support from FEMA's Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants. The SAFER program

should be expanded to assist fire prone communities with seasonal hiring. These seasonal hires could also be used to enhance the community outreach with a focus on building a more fire adapted community.

The utilization of air resources is controversial and expensive. The homeowner believes a retardant drop alone will put out the fire and the fire chief knows the cost of retardant would cripple their budget. Frequently, a wildland fire is inaccessible to conventional fire department apparatus. The use of aviation resources early on could keep a small fire from becoming another expensive large fire. Currently an IC from a local fire district must rely on a FS or DNR Duty Officer to arrive on the incident and make a determination on the appropriateness of the use of helicopters or air tankers. As a rule of thumb, "the agency that calls for it, pays for it" so the Duty Officer needs to determine if the fire is either in their jurisdiction or is a threat to their jurisdiction.

Here is an example: A five to ten acre brush fire across the Columbia River, with poor access, took 45 minutes for the first fire apparatus to arrive. DNR was notified and a helicopter was requested. The fire was outside of DNR's jurisdiction and they couldn't/wouldn't authorize the expense. A helicopter operating for 10 hours in support of the ground firefighter would have cost, on the high side \$30,000 (10 hours x \$3,000 an hour). Instead, the local fire department went through all their resources, all the available neighboring resources and then requested State Mobilization. The mobilization was authorized and the fire ended up costing the state around \$175,000, when it could have been handled for around \$30,000. Like the Sleepy Hollow Fire, which took almost two hours to get the first helicopter on it, this fire started out small. Local fire districts in North Central Washington cannot afford one bill for \$30,000 let alone the cost of an entire fire season. If the State and Federal government want the fires extinguished when they are small and manageable, we need the resources to do the job. Provide funding for early helicopter (initial attack) use with state or federal funds. Give the local fire chiefs/IC's the authority to call for them when they are needed. Have the State or Federal government pay for it so the local fire district is not financially devastated from the cost. This process will save money by keeping the fires smaller and more manageable.

Local fire departments have two major federal grants available to them, FEMA's SAFER grant, which was addressed above, and the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG). The majority of the FEMA Grant awards go to larger organizations which are much better funded, better staffed, and have strong neighboring departments to help them out during major emergencies. That is not the case in most of the communities where homes are being lost to wildfires. Many rural fire departments rely on used military equipment for their wildland apparatus. There should be a better method of prioritizing grant funds to rural departments.

I have provided my perception of a complex issue. By no means do I feel the system is broken. There are many good efforts being performed with a common goal of reducing the risks from wildfires. However there are opportunities to improve our efforts via funding for rural fire departments, enhancing education and prevention strategies, and continued fuel reduction efforts. Our citizens recognize the need, and have the expectation, for us to address how we can improve our response to wildland fires. The problems we face are becoming more complex reinforcing the need for action.

In closing, I want to thank the Committee again for hearing my testimony and I appreciate the opportunity to provide a voice in this important discussion on how to improve future federal wildland fire management strategies.

Sincerely,

Mike Burnett, Fire Chief