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WRITTEN TESTIMONY SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOUC
COMMITTEE

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ROOM 366 DIRKSEN SENTATE OFFICE BUILDING

Senator Murkowski, Senator Cantwell and members of the Committee my testimony to you today is as Chairman of the Okanogan County Long Term Recovery Group, formerly known as the Carlton Complex Long Term Recovery Group. Chairing this organization has been one of the most challenging, and yet most rewarding things I have ever done. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this fine organization and thankful you have given us the opportunity to testify today.

I was born Thermopolis WY and raised in Worland, WY just east Yellowstone National Park and near the beautiful Big Horn Mountains. Growing up in Wyoming allowed me to have great respect for our natural environment, our national forests, our national parks, and a great respect for people and their private property rights.

It also allowed me to see my first Wildfire Disaster in 1988 when Yellowstone National Park was set ablaze by a lightning strike. I remember school being canceled because of air quality issues, one of my best friends who had asthma was forced to stay inside and wear a mask to ensure he could breath, and having to shovel ash off the car as if it were snow in the middle of winter. Who knew 27 years later I would be right in the middle of Washington States largest back-to-back wildfires in history and reliving these same issues.

After graduating I attended college in Texas and prior to joining my wife's family company, Gebbers Farms, as an Analyst and Government Affairs Director I served as the Chief Deputy Assessor for Spokane County, worked for the US Bankruptcy Trustee Offices in Texas, South Dakota, Oregon and Washington over 11 years, and even served 3 days as a Washington State

Senator when Senator Brad Benson was on military leave.

My childhood upbringing and my employment background give me a unique perspective when looking at all of the environmental, financial and legislative impacts of the fires that have disrupted our communities.

The 2015 Washington Wildfire Season consumed over 1 million acres and consisted of 8 major fires and multiple smaller fires. The fires threatened homes, cabins, hotels, agricultural grazing lands (both government owned and private), small businesses, critical infrastructure and lives. In all 13 counties and four different Tribal Reservation lands were impacted by the 2015 fires in Washington State.

The Okanogan, Tunk Block and North Star Complex wildfires burned the largest amount of acreage in state history at 522,920 surpassing the previous record set in the 2014 Carlton Complex Fire which burned 256,108 acres. The below chart gives additional information of acreages burned by area as of 9-18-2015:

9 MILE	4,712 ac	2-SFR	0-Cabins	3-Misc Buildings
Chelan Complex-Okanogan	35,036 ac	7-SFR	0-Cabins	12-Misc Buildings
Newby Lake	5,150 ac			
North Star	157,437 ac			
Okanogan Complex	133,130 ac	32-SFR	40-Cabins	35-Misc Buildings
Tunk Block	162,992 ac	36-SFR	46-Cabins	50-Misc Buildings
Twisp Fire	11,119 ac	7-SFR	3-Cabins	7-Misc Buildings
Wild Horse	163 ac			
Total Okanogan County 509,739 ac		**SFR - Single Family Residence Destroyed		
Chelan Complex-Chelan	26,237 ac			
Chelan Complex-Douglas	27,752 ac			
North Star-Ferry County	60,593 ac			
Total 114,582 ac				
Total Combined Fire 624,321 ac				

To put these fires in perspective the Carlton Complex Fire is four times the size of Seattle and the Okanogan Complex Fires would encompass Rhode Island. When you add in the Sleepy Hallow Fire near Wenatchee, WA and the Chelan Complex fires, the fire perimeter would be 1,261 miles which is from Washington DC to Denver, CO.

The communities within Okanogan County and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation were struggling to recover from the physical, emotional, and economic damages of the 2014 Carlton Complex fires when the 2015 fires erupted. The Okanogan Complex fires caused level three immediate evacuations of more than 1900 residents, a near repeat of the 2014 Carlton Complex Fires.

While Chelan County had immediate level 3 evacuations for an additional 2900 residents, including residents in Douglas County. My own home was placed on a level 2 evacuation notice.

At one point all of Stevens County was placed on a level one evacuation because power outages, emergency alert outages, and lack of fire protection assets to carry out evacuations. While at the same time the cell towers went down, power went out, and internet lost within the Colville Reservation causing significant communication challenges.

Our local police, county sheriffs, other law enforcement personnel, and emergency management agencies in conjunction with our local firefighters did everything they could to notify people to leave as these massive fires exploded in each of the counties.

Our community members, many farmers and ranchers, packed as many belongings as they could fit into their cars and trucks, taking only what they could fit in their vehicles. While the children loaded the cars and trucks, the parents were doing everything they could to load up livestock, horses and animals to get them away from harms way. When it came time to leave not all the memories were packed up and the animals could not all fit into one trailer, the families swung gates open and cut fences to let the animals out to fend for themselves. The families then gathered together to say a prayer that their animals and homes would be protected. They then loaded up in the vehicles and ran, not knowing when they could return and not knowing the fate of their animals.

When they could return, some came back to homes standing and animals still alive, while others lost their homes, all their belongings, and some of

the animals could not outrun the fires and perished only to be known by the bangs tag number in the ear of the cow.

Then, as the fires raged on and the winds picked up, we heard over the radio a call that no one fighting wildfires ever wants to hear, “we have 7 firefighters entrapped on the Twisp River Fire”. On that fateful day August 19, the fire bell rang for the last time for three brave soles as they tried to escape the fires. We pay our respects to the victims and their families as they sacrificed everything to keep our communities safe.

The 2014 fires destroyed 353 homes and caused an estimated \$98 million dollars in damages. Then Mother Nature had one more punch for those in the Carlton Complex Fires. On August 21, 2014 a rainstorm dropped one inch of rain on the land reduced to ash and bare soil causing a flash flood and massive mudslides to washed out small irrigation dams, houses of foundations, vehicles into creeks, and cause sections of the highway to wash away under 5 foot of mud and 145’ wide causing additional economic damage. We now wait, in each of the impacted counties and tribal reservations, for the impending mudslides and floods that could come as a result of the 2015 fires when the rains start and the snow pack melts.

The 2015 fires burned 107 miscellaneous buildings, 89 Cabins, and 114 homes. Housing in the burn areas has become critical because of the loss of over 460 homes in an area with less than a 1% vacancy rate pre Carlton Complex in 2014.

In total at the time of Washington States FEMA Application, 29 fire mobilizations costing an estimated \$28,845,000 in fire suppression costs were expended on local lands. Additionally the state incurred an estimated \$94,872,860 in fire suppression costs on state lands. Could some of these costs been avoided if we had better real time weather information?

As you may or may not be aware, similar to portions of western Washington before 2011, the National Weather Service (NWS) Doppler radar network has a gap or hole in coverage along the eastern slopes of the Cascades to the Canadian Border and down to the Columbia Basin outside of Yakima (Exhibit A).

There are five (5) active Doppler radars that monitor real-time weather conditions for the state of Washington (Spokane, Pendleton, Langley Hill (Grays Harbor), Camano Island (Seattle), and Portland) that are utilized by the NWS to monitor hazardous weather conditions and predict weather. None of the five radars have coverage of weather conditions below 10,000 feet in the north eastern slopes of the Cascades to the Canadian Border and down to the Columbia Basin outside of Yakima.

This season's wildfires will leave many areas prone to severe debris flows, including areas below that are heavily populated with substantial public and private infrastructure. Better, more accurate information will help agencies and private property owners prepare and respond to these events, potentially reducing the impacts and costs associated with clean up.

In Washington State, the US Forest Service has over four times more land than that owned by the State of Washington. Over the last 27 years we have seen a change in forest management practices and a decline in timber harvest on Federal Lands. The Washington State DNR has harvested 30 times more volume than the USFS and has been 1283 times more profitable (Exhibit B).

By not managing the forest properly we have increased the fuel load, lowered the timber value and increased the chance for massive wildfires. The current practice of fire borrowing has also led to a significant amount of challenges to managing the forest. Rather than performing the necessary treatments to keep fires smaller and more manageable, the funds are spent on fighting the fires.

After back-to-back fires many are saying Log It, Graze It, or Watch it burn. With that said, we don't want to promote unabated logging and landscape alterations. Common ground can be found on these issues. A steady, manageable, and proper treatment plan across the full landscape will lead to a healthy forest and less wildfire.

A local rancher and forester told me:

“We must remember fire is good for the environment when it can burn along the ground and in a controlled manner. Fire is not good when it races through the untreated corridors of riparian area that have been untouched for 30 years or more. These untreated forests and untreated riparian areas have built up fuel loads that lead to bad fire. This is not natural and simply out of balance, just as over harvesting of timber would be out of balance the other way.

These conditions can be changed with proper management that isn't paralyzed by incessant threats and appeals. It is not a zero sum game where it all has to burn in a devastating and expensive way to hit the reset button”.

What lessons can and have we learned from these fires?

Lesson one: It all starts right here! Right here is what decides it all.

This committee hearing and the comments from those testifying will decide where we go in the future. It starts right here with you, the elected officials, who have oversight and can propose legislation to ensure these types of fire do not happen again. It starts from the agencies wanting to make the changes that are needed and being bold in the choices they make to ensure this never happens again.

For example during the 2015 fires a state contracted cat was being used to build a fire suppression line through state and private lands. When the cat and driver reached Forest Service Grounds, they were stopped from continuing to build the fire suppression line due to the lack of the cat not having the federal certifications and inspections.

Second, we for the first in decades put out a call for volunteers to come and help fight the fires as they were so wide spread. With those volunteers came heavy equipment such as dozers, graders, water trucks, and people. The problem was that we did not have enough trained fire bosses and fire managers with the proper training to lead the volunteers for fire suppression. Therefore additional acreage burned.

These two examples should never have happened. If the equipment is certified to fight fire on a state level, in disasters such as ours, they should be accepted by the federal level or vice versa.

It is imperative that we work to get more trained professionals to be able to lead suppression efforts in the future. This type of training should be done up front, not only to keep the volunteers safe but also the firefighters and emergency personnel who would be leading the fire suppression efforts.

Lesson two: Top dirt is precious.

What we can all agree is that the top dirt and land is precious. What we have learned over the years is that it is expensive to manage the lands, but even more so to repair the lands devastated by fire. The question is do you continue to take money out of proper management, take away harvesting of the timber, take away recreational access, and take away grazing that assists in proper manage the forests only to have them burn up and expend twice the amount of money putting out a fire.

It is time that we end fire borrowing and put that money back into the proper management of lands to keep our riparian areas healthier, our forests healthier, and our natural resource economy vibrant in the local communities.

Lesson three: What are the cascading impacts of wildfire on our communities.

Well in Washington State, we grow some of the best apples and cherries in the world. We also have some of the best cattlemen and women who have the best beef. On top of that we have some of the most pristine views and recreation spots in the nation.

Our orchardists now face difficulties with wildlife coming into the orchards and eating the buds and limbs right off the tree causing a reduction of next years fruit production. Then, add to this that with the fire damage to the riparian areas, many feel that stream temperatures will rise and have a

negative impact on salmon runs. This could lead to junior water right holders having their water turned off during the most critically growing time. This loss of production will cause additional economic harm to our area.

In 2015 approximately 150,000 acres of deer winter range burned that supports 10,000+ mule deer (Exhibit C Pg. 20). These deer now face an uncertain future without feed. In order to protect our agriculturists from further economic harm, requests for depredation tags could be made to reduce the herds and limit further economic damage.

Additionally, the cattle are competing for native grasses for feed with the wildlife in unburned pasture. Ranchers are having to take additional measures protect their hay stacks from the wildlife.

These same cattlemen and women have also lost the use of their range permits for 3-5 years. The fires destroyed over 700 miles of fence at approximately \$8,000 a mile to restore. An additional 125 miles of fence within the boundaries of the Colville Reservation must also be replaced at approximately \$18,000 a mile due to the difficult of terrain. These additional costs placed onto our farmers and ranchers may lead to family farms not able to financially recover financially and forced to sell.

Much of the fence that was burned was on National Forest Service permitted grounds where cattle grazed. The US Forest Service will not qualify for Public Assistance to replace the burned fence on these grazing grounds, as the fence is not maintained by the US Forest Service. That leaves the federal ECP program, Emergency Conservation Program, to assist ranchers to replace burned fence on the Forest Service lands through a cost share. That fund however has been depleted.

These fires have also introduced a new challenge because the wildlife will be more concentrated in the unburned areas of the state along with livestock and other domestic animals. The concentration of the wildlife and other animals has brought Apex predators such as wolves, cougars, and bears closer to our towns and family farms. Bears have already been seen inside the city limits and one school had to keep kids from going to recess

as a cougar was found near the school playground.

To our friends and neighbors on the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and Spokane Tribes Reservation, these fires have added additional burdens and challenges. “Twenty percent of the managed timberlands on the Colville Reservation burned during the 2015 firestorms. Timber revenues make up approximately 20-25% of the annual operating budget for the Colville Tribe. The Spokane Tribe estimated that the Carpenter Road Fire in Stevens County impacted \$1 million dollars in timber”, once again hitting another tribes’ budget significantly (Exhibit D Pg. 19).

All of these compounding impacts have placed a significant financial burden on our rural communities.

Lesson four: "Citizens of this great nation are owners in the lands. It ought to mean something."

The tax payers of this nation are owners in the public lands be they forest service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, WDFW or DNR or other agency and it ought to mean something.

After the Carlton Complex Fires the State House and Senate passed House Bill 2093, by Rep. Joel Kretz, unanimously. The bill would:

- allow locals to access state land to help put out a fire without being held liable by the state,
- require the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to coordinate and share a list of locals who are qualified to fight fires and enter into agreements with them to use locals first during a fire, and
- require the Commissioner of Public Lands to appoint both a fire liaison who will represent landowners and the public during a fire, and a Fire Advisory Committee to advise the commissioner on fire activities.

Passage of this bill was important as in the early morning hours of Friday August 14, 2015 the same lightning storm that started the Black Canyon, Squaw Creek, Chelan (Reach), Lime Belt, and Tunk Block Fires, also started the Paradise Fire. The Paradise fire, which you don't hear much about, was directly inside the center of the Carlton Complex fire known as the “donut hole”. The “donut hole” is just north of the town of Brewster, WA. The Paradise fire was threatening 680 acres of DNR land, 11,520 acres of Forest

Service land and 10,240 acres of private lands that make up the donut hole.

The Paradise fire was reported at 6:10 AM to the DNR. DNR advised us of that they had a number of lightning strikes and fires going in a number of places and therefore, would get to our area as soon as possible. We advised the office that we had the necessary equipment to put the fire out.

We were given the ok to send our equipment to the fire. Our staff mobilized the necessary equipment to surround the fire and contain it from spreading. What could have been another fire that burned over 22,000 acres, was limited to 2.7 acres and out within hours.

This shows the bill worked. Utilizing local and available resources kept state mobilized resources from being pulled away from other fires around the state and county. This also shows that local resources closer to the fires can respond quickly, effectively and efficiently. Having this same type of legislation federally would be beneficial.

Ownership and management of these lands ought to mean something. We can no longer afford to burn up the public and private lands at over 1,000,000 acres at a time. These policy changes should include better communications and cooperation with local citizens in the areas of potential impact.

These policies must contain dollars for rehabilitation after the fires. The rehabilitation dollars should be used to ensure that re-seeding in the area is done, consistent with the BAER (Burned Area Emergency Response) reports. These efforts will also minimize the return of noxious weeds as well as provide for bank stabilization in hopes of preventing mudslides and floods.

Theses fires have left our communities with massive challenges to recovery. How do you recover from the Carlton Complex Fire when your community has lost 353 homes, over 800 head of cattle, hundreds of miles of fence along with nearly \$100 million dollars in damages? Most would answer FEMA.

The Governor's office filed for federal assistance from FEMA to help recover from the 2014 fires. FEMA arrived conducting an initial assessment for Individual and Public Assistance. Following the assessment the petition was denied for individual assistance but approved for public assistance.

We were thankful for the public assistance declaration that helped our government and public agencies restore public infrastructure. However, those in our rural community, with limited income, no insurance and limited options questioned why the individual assistance was denied. The main reason for the denial: "the damage was not concentrated enough". Upon learning of the reason for the denial, you can imagine we had a few choice words, but the public words were "no kidding the damage was not concentrated enough, we burned 4 times the size of Seattle".

Now a year later, we have the 2015 firestorms of Washington State where nearly 2% of our state burned in one month. Again, we turned to FEMA and even after back-to-back incidents, the damage did not meet the subjective threshold by FEMA for individual assistance, but public assistance was granted. To say we are disappointed is an understatement.

FEMA is seeking public comment on proposed changes to regulation describing FEMA's Individual Assistance declarations criteria. FEMA published the proposed rule in the *Federal Register* and is seeking comments by January 11, 2016. You can be assured we will be providing written comments.

While not granting individual assistance two years in a row has been a challenge, the citizens of Washington State are resourceful and resilient. The citizens have formed long term recovery groups to fill in the gaps. These long term recovery groups and committees are organized across multiple counties from Chelan to Stevens County, including organizations within the Kalispell, Spokane and Colville Reservations. We are all working together to support those who have lost and are in need. The main recovery group is the Okanogan Complex Long Term Recovery Group, formerly known as the Carlton Complex LTRG.

These organizations have not been left high and dry however by our state

and federal agencies. The Forest Service, USDA, HUD, FEMA, US Department of Fish and Wildlife, and a host of other agencies have worked closely with us to assist our communities in recovery efforts. We appreciated the fact that Secretary of Interior Sally Jewel came to Okanogan County during the fires to learn about the impacts of the fire on our communities and especially the Colville Indian Reservation.

Each agency has played a role in ensuring our communities are prepared for the next disaster. They have held multiple conference calls with our organizations and hosted a number of trainings to help us better understand how to put our communities in a better position. So while disappointed in the denial of individual assistance, we appreciate the doors that have been opened to help our community.

One particular campaign that is moving forward is called Methow Ready. The Methow Valley Long Term Recovery Organization is implementing this campaign. The goal is to have residents throughout the area and the valley be prepared with supplies and to be self sufficient in case of disaster or loss of essential services.

Senator Cantwell I would like to thank you personally on behalf of the recovery groups for traveling to our community during the Carlton Complex Fires and for your attempt to get to our area during this years fires to meet with citizens and community leaders before being turned around as highways were closed.

We appreciate that you held a meeting in Wenatchee and then co-hosted a meeting with Rep. McMorris-Rodgers in Spokane. These meetings with various fire chiefs, industry leaders, and elected officials continuously keep the issue in the forefront and the ideas gathered, will lead to change. These meetings may not seem like a big issue but it has given people in our communities hope that we will recover and that our elected officials are listening.

Right here and right now is our time to get it right to stop these massive wildfires. Thank you for your time.