



Opening Statement
Hearing on the U.S. Forest Service FY 2021 Budget Request
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
February 25, 2020

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

Okay, first budget hearing in the Energy Committee. Nice to get started. This morning we will consider the President’s budget request for the U.S. Forest Service for FY 2021. Chief Christiansen, it’s good to be able to welcome you back to the committee, thank you for being here.

We say around here that the President’s budget request is just that—it is a request. It does start the annual budget process. It gives us here in Congress the opportunity to learn about the administration’s priorities and how it would carry them out. But ultimately, it is up to us to determine what programs to fund and what levels.

Although this year’s budget request is far from perfect, I agree that the priority must be on wildland fire management and improving the health of our forests. I’m encouraged that the administration is proposing to invest significantly in hazardous fuel reduction and other active forest management activities. We know such investments pay dividends in reducing the risk of severe wildfire.

Hopefully we will see this important work planned and carried out without any disruptions thanks to our work on the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, which provided new budget authority to fight wildfires. The “fire fix” will be available for the first time in FY 2020 and this budget request would make use of it for FY 2021.

The 2019 fire season was relatively mild in the Lower 48, with a few notable exceptions. But in Alaska, last summer is going to be going down in the history books. We had over 600 fires that burned over 2.5 million acres, we had the nation’s costliest fire of the year—the Swan Lake Fire on the Kenai Peninsula.

Thousands of firefighters from across Alaska, 46 states, Canada, and even Puerto Rico fought fires in Alaska last summer. Hazardous fuel reduction projects and fuel breaks provided effective help with firefighters as they beat back the fires and prevented them from spreading into communities. But it was a tough, tough summer for us.

As more and more of our forests die off due to beetle infestations across Alaska and elsewhere, this work becomes more urgent. We know that we need more of it. And Chief, you certainly know that fires have no boundaries there, and what we can do to work together is important.

I appreciate the Forest Service acknowledging its cooperative work with the State of Alaska on the beetle infestation in its budget justification, but I am dismayed that this request proposes to cut the overall program – the Forest Health Management on Cooperative Lands – and other state and private forestry programs.

Even with the “fire fix” in place, wildfire will continue to consume a large percentage of the budget, so I’m pleased the Forest Service wants to invest in building capacity to more effectively use technology in wildland fire management.

That will help ensure we are smart as we fight the fires – always keeping firefighter safety at the forefront. I think we owe appreciation to Senator Gardner and Senator Cantwell for their work on the wildfire technology provisions in the Dingell Act, which was signed just about a year ago.

Another area where I think we all know we need to do more is with recreation. Recreation is the single greatest use of our national forests, but this request does not accurately reflect that in my view. In Alaska, I routinely hear about the demand for new recreation uses and corresponding difficulties in getting permits for them. I was just in Southeast this past week, and again heard that repeated. Last year we held a hearing on recreation and heard about the need for permitting reform. I’m still hopeful we can work together to make some meaningful progress here in Congress.

Similar to recreation, I remain concerned that agency initiatives to create a positive workforce are not adequately articulated in this request. Time and again, I have urged Forest Service leadership to cultivate a work environment that is free of harassment and retaliation. I’m also concerned by the increasing rate of suicide among wildland firefighters. These issues are a priority here on this committee, I think they are a priority for all of us, I look forward to hearing how the Forest Service intends to address them.

In wrapping up, I think I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the Forest Service’s work on Roadless. The agency’s state-specific rulemaking for the Tongass has always been about reasonable access for every local stakeholder in the 32 islanded communities in Southeast Alaska. Not just timber – barely timber, if we’re actually being honest here – but also transportation, tourism, mining, and even renewable energy. So my thanks to you, Chief, as well as Secretary Perdue and all who are working on this rule. I know it is not easy and I think that sometimes your good work is frequently mischaracterized. So I appreciate, again, all that you’re doing with that.

Let me turn to my colleague, Senator Manchin, for his comments.

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