

Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Full Committee Hearing

Witnesses: Mr. Randy Moore, Chief, U.S Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Opening Statement

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

SENATOR CANTWELL: The US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources will come to order. I'm obviously filling in for Chairman Manchin this morning who expects to be here later today.

I want to thank Chief Moore for being here today. In the last 18 months Congress has provided you with more than a quarter of a billion dollar increase in annual appropriations and an additional \$5.4 billion in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and an additional \$5 billion in the Inflation Reduction Act.

These are timely and vital investments. In February, the President's Council of Advisors of Science and Technology issued a report to the President noting that more than 100 million Americans now live in areas that are threatened by wildfires.

And as the Government Accountability Office noted last week, between January and October of last year, nearly 60,000 wildfires affected 7.2 million acres of land. GAO noted that the length of the fire season and frequency of fires are increasing, while more people and infrastructure are at risk from these wildfires.

Chief Moore I know you are excited to discuss the proposed budget and how to meet those challenges. We too want to discuss those priorities because fire season is fast approaching.

While I'm relieved to see the National Interagency Fire Center has not yet predicted a dangerous fire season for the West, an area facing significant wildfire risk is the Central Washington, part of our state.

This is home to a very highly productive agricultural part of our state and I want to better understand how the Forest Service is going to help rural communities in Central Washington prevent, and protect, and recover from wildfire season.

As we consider the Forest Service budget today, it's important to discuss how the Forest Service is spending historic investments made last Congress and how additional funding the administration is seeking would bolster our investments.

I would like to start by commending you on the legislative proposal included in your budget to address a number of the problems facing wildland firefighters. I appreciate you're setting up a new pay table for these workers building off the successes of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill and your stated desire to hire 970 more men and women to fill these roles.

As we work through this, I do want to make sure that the funding, and that we are cognizant of what the funding is going to take to make these proposals a reality. I am told there is not a lot of cushion in the wildfire contingency reserve that we enacted five years ago as part of the fire borrowing fix. And as everyone knows, we wanted to like quit borrowing from the fund and actually do the work that would help us prevent some of the fires from being at that catastrophic level.

I was commenting to Senator Barrasso and thanking him for him coming to Seattle and us having a subcommittee hearing on wildland fire fighting then, after we had seen devastating fires in the same Central Washington part of our state. And so these are very, very important issues.

Senators, Wyden, Risch, and I, along with others worked hard to successfully end the practice of fire borrowing, and we must ensure that the Forest Service does not return to that practice of robbing non-fire accounts to cover fire costs.

Lastly, I was surprised and disappointed to see that your proposal did not include anything in regard to your requirements under the Dingell Act to provide firefighters with the best technology for fighting fires and keeping firefighters safe.

The Dingell Act, which required Forest Service to equip firefighters with technologies that are meant to prove safety. I see nothing with regard to this requirement in the Forest Service proposal. So, we'll have a chance to ask in Q&A about that.

I would like to acknowledge a few other components of your budget proposal that are important to my state. For example, I appreciate this year's budget establishment of a permanent program to fund rehabilitation work after wildfires.

The Burned Area Response Program will be able to provide more resources to areas impacted by wildfires like those impacted by the Bolt Creek Fire that shut down Highway-2 in Washington last year after the fire burned the mountain slope just above the highway.

These are really important areas to keeping communities operating, and in this case a very vital link between the east and west part of our state, open and moving.

I also appreciate the discussion in your budget about the inventory. The old growth stands on the National Forests and your proposed investment in the outdoor recreation funding is historic.

Outdoor Recreation employs over 114,000 people in the state of Washington and according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, this sector grew by 8.7% over the last year.

So, we love the outdoor economy, it's continuing to grow and we're working with our colleagues to try to very specifically focus on trail funding. But we are still falling short in what we need to do, because these are many family day trips, many backpacking adventures that many people come to Washington for, and many people in Washington want to enjoy.

So, with that, there's a lot to talk about in the Q&A and a lot to hear from our witnesses on. I'll now turn it over to the ranking member, Senator Barrasso for his opening remarks. And thanks again, for your long-standing interest in these issues and paying attention to them and being willing to come to Washington after one of our big, big fire seasons.

Q&A Portion

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

SENATOR CANTWELL: All right, well, let's get started. I wanted to start with this year's fire season question that the Forest Service has put out, an announcement that might make most parts of Washington feel pretty good about what's happening.

But the central part of our state, which is a very big ag economy, [over \$4] billion worth of agricultural products, seems to be right in the epicenter of what people are saying will be the hotspot.

So again, it can - definitely my colleague from Oregon, I'm sure will show up and communicate about what this forecast is showing for Oregon. But you know, we have a very big apple, pears, hops, cherries, wine, industry in this part of the United States.

So, we really want to know about your workforce and firefighting budget. Right now, firefighters have to work hundreds of hours of overtime and how is your proposed increase going to help us address what we're facing here in the central part of Washington and in Oregon?

U.S. FOREST SERVICE CHIEF RANDY MOORE: So, Chairwoman Cantwell, that was about three questions into one and so I'll try and address them.

SENATOR CANTWELL: I have three more. Because I definitely want to ask you about the inventory of old growth, I want to ask you why you haven't implemented the technology, and definitely want to ask you about the trails issue. But for now, I'm really giving you a softball, which is you want more people, I'm saying you want more people.

By the way, I want to recognize we have a bunch of firefighters here, particularly from the Mount Baker Snoqualmie Forest. So, thank you for being here, thanks for what you guys do. "I noticed when I talked about Bolt Creek, they were nodding because they know how bad that fire, literally caused now a problem with shutting down Highway-2."

So, these are really integral, day to day. So, what can we do on the workforce side to make sure that we have the personnel here and ready to fight this fire season?

CHIEF RANDY MOORE: Yeah. So excellent question. So, as we approach the busiest part of the fire year of 2023, for this year, the Forest Service is really aspiring to have about 11,300 firefighters on board.

You know, we know that we need additional capacity, which is why we're requesting additional capacity in the FY24 President's Budget. And we're requesting funding for an additional 975 firefighters and support personnel.

This really reinforces the need to enact pay, housing, mental health, and other reforms proposed in the FY24 President's Budget to effectively recruit and retain wildland firefighters.

Housing is a really big issue and it's an issue of availability, but also affordability. And so we are working feverishly to work with Congress, and we'd be happy to follow up with you to look at what some options that we are currently trying to explore, but to also look to see and work together on other options that we might want to pursue.

But it's a significant issue not only in recruitment of firefighters, but retention of firefighters.

SENATOR CANTWELL: Well, I think what we'd like, and maybe Mr. Lichtenstein can add some value to this and get us an answer. But I talked in my statement, I'm sure you have statistics, about what we're seeing as an increase in fire season, the risk, the burn, the damage, the economic impact.

And so, I think we can put that into some sort of percentage and if you say and if you don't have the workforce to combat it, this is how much more challenging it'll be. And so I guess that's what we're looking for, but we'll come back on that.

On the Dingell Act on the technology side, I noticed the President issued a report modernizing wildland firefighting to protect firefighters.

And the President's quote was "immediate needs that can be addressed with existing technologies to ensure that our firefighters do not have to face tomorrow's fires with yesterday's tools."

So, we passed the Dingell Act several years ago. So, when are we going to have these new tools for firefighters this year on technology, on mapping, on communication?

CHIEF RANDY MOORE: So, Chairwoman Cantwell we have deployed trackers in certain areas, and we are working through the interoperability in other areas. We're also issuing and developing standards for their use.

We will be deploying resource trackers on our fire and our fleet vehicles this year, this fiscal year, and we plan to operationalize the wildland firefighter trackers in 2024.

We are also working with the Colorado Center of Excellence to develop team awareness kits that really provides a common operating picture for the crews as they work on these incidents,

SENATOR CANTWELL: well, I again I can't emphasize enough how important this technology and information is. You may know we were very involved, particularly when it came to weather forecasting.

Because we again, what turned into be a deadly fire in the central part of the state, and a forecaster that basically said, "yeah, go deploy people."

But people in Seattle, were definitely saying "no, you shouldn't have deployed people, the winds were that high."

So, we got to get the right information in the hands of people who are on the ground taking the risk. And so, we will follow up with you and get even more specificity on what the resources can be that we need to make sure this is implemented.