

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Fire Ready Nation Act Press Conference and Tour

Speakers: Andy Brown, Meteorologist (Northwest Weather Service); Scott Windsor, Executive Director (Spokane Clean Air Agency); Chandra Fox, Deputy Director (Spokane Emergency Management); Chris Wyrobek, Assistant Fire Chief (Spokane County Fire District 5)

June 1st, 2022

[[VIDEO](#)]

Senator Cantwell: Thank you Chandra for really painting a picture of what we're trying to do here today. It's a privilege to be with everybody here as we try to prepare for this year's fire season. I want to express my gratitude to the men and women who work every day like Chris, to help fight the wildfires here in Washington and across the West.

Today, the National inner agency coordination center released its updated significant wildland fire potential outlook, which really is what we think might happen July through September in Central and Eastern Washington and we know we will face a significant fire threat. Each year wildfires result in irreplaceable loss of life and homes and property. They destroy our crops and timber, and obviously smoke damage. In 2021, 674,000 acres burned here, which is a 40% increase above the 10 year average for us. So in response to wildfire lookout what else can we do? Well, today we're here to talk about how better weather forecasting can lead to better response times.

These programs that we all work for, the US Forest Service and the Department of Interior, help us in fighting wildland fires. But we're here today to also highlight the investment that NOAA makes, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, and what they do as our nation's weather forecasters. They play a critical role in preparing and responding to wildfires. You just heard Chris talk about how he relies on their information, not just in what's going to happen and where the fire is going to move, but in our own suppression tactics, and how we respond.

Here at the Spokane National Weather Service dedicated forecasters are constantly evaluating those weather conditions and the threat of fire. During last year's fire season, this office produced a record number of 1,193 spot forecasts needed to fight those fires. You cannot fight these fires without NOAA's critical service and when the wildfires occur, these brave men and women are deployed right along the first responders to ensure that the firefighters on the line have the best data and information they need to get the job done and to stay safe. We owe it to those firefighters to make sure that they have the very best data about the changing of winds, the changing of conditions that might turn into what we call in the firefighting service to blow out conditions that may change drastically and want us to move the firefighters to another location.

So what is what is the infrastructure bill? Last November, Congress passed an infrastructure bill, which included \$8 billion dollars and 20 federal programs to help communities reduce risks, to reduce the fuel and to help in the restored burn areas. But it also included \$5 billion to help replace our grid when our grid is attacked and it helped us with this investment of \$100 million for NOAA and for upgrading their

weather forecasting information and to replace data collection systems and enhance the modeling for better forecasting for the future.

So today, we will see the SULA meter, a smoke sensor that basically acts like smoke radar. It'll be used at the Spokane Airport. This smoke sensor detection will in the next two years help us in ways to give the nation and here in Spokane, the smoke network system. We will install 900 of these similar devices and create the first tracking system of smoke, similar to radar, so that communities can respond. Imagine having three days earlier information about what the smoke might be doing in a region. That is more information to our farmers so they can plan our harvest. More information to our airports so they can plan in advance of the kind of outages or system routes that might be affected. Its three days more information that you can have to our healthcare officials so they can plan for the smoke related health impacts that the community might see. The infrastructure bill also included \$80 million for high performance supercomputing, as was just discussed, so that that supercomputing can help us with those forecasts.

So for people on the ground here in Spokane, this fire season, which we know will play out over many years of higher challenges for us, these are precious resources that will help NOAA help our firefighters with better forecasting tools, or Incident Meteorologists embedded on the ground, and provide real time science information to help us.

In addition, as mentioned, I have introduced a bill with, along with my colleague Senator Sullivan from Alaska, called the Fire Ready Nation Act to give additional tools to these efforts that are testbeds for what will be un-crewed missions, to be able to help us in getting data for our firefighting teams. It also would allow for commercial data from satellites to be used in the future to also enhance our capabilities.

So today, we're talking about what the infrastructure bill did, but as we can see that this is going to be a constant challenge. Continuing to upgrade our tools are the best ways to keep our community safe, to give them the information they need. Drought and wildfires accounted for 87% of across crop loss nationally, and amounted to \$665 million in agriculture losses here in the state of Washington and we know that smoke strains our health. So today, we are making it clear we need to be a better ready nation when it comes to fighting fire. And that means making better investments in our weather and weather forecasting equipment. Thank you all very much and now I think we're going to see a few demonstrations.