

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Hearing to Examine the Federal Response to Escalating Wildfires and to Evaluate Reforms to Land Management and Wildland Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

Witnesses: Mr. Jeffrey Rupert, Director, Office of Wildland Fire, U.S. Department of the Interior; Ms. Haelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief of State, Private, and Tribal Forestry, USDA Forest Service; Ms Kelly Norries, Interim State Forester, Wyoming State Forestry Division; Mr. Cardell D. Johnson, Director, Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Government Accountability Office

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

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I think America is waking up at least on the East Coast to this problem. And we certainly have known all about it on the West Coast for some time now. And I think that it is time and opportunity for us to really break down the barriers that are prohibiting us from having a faster response, and work quickly on the faster response.

Unfortunately, for us the latest map of the forecast for this summer, I think the last time we showed this at our last hearing, Mr. Chairman, there was a little bit of Washington in the red. But now my whole state is in the forecast for this summer being in the epicenter of this. We know this already, because we have been affected by the British Columbia fires that are affecting our state [with] smoke. But we also know that there are small fires already burning in Central Washington and a small fire in Yakima County, which grew to 150 acres last night.

So first and foremost, I believe that we need better cooperation between the Forest Service and the state to break down any barriers that are preventing us from having a quick aviation response. That is being able to on the ground, we have something that is very effective in having people work collectively on identifying fires and responding.

So one, we need to break down those aviation barriers and get a faster response, we need to implement the technology communication tools that we asked the Forest Service about the last hearing that gives us again, communication directly to where the fire is and what we're doing in response.

And third, I think is really time to engage with the Canadians. We can't just be sitting here, thinking that we have solved this problem because our continent knows no U.S./Canadian barrier.

And if we're going to have management service, and I've been a huge supporter of cross-laminated timber as a firebreak issue, I've been a huge supporter of moving the time period by where we do [prescribed] burns, there's probably very hardly any time now to do [prescribed] burns in the middle of summer, it just doesn't happen. Mr. Chairman, I think some of my colleagues probably get this. But literally, the reason why people didn't do [prescribed] burns in the springtime is because people are like well, there'll be some smoke. Well, because we're not doing prescribed burns, we're getting a whole lot of smoke.

Okay, so the point is, let's change our management system response so that we can reduce fire risk. This summer is telling us we need to do that now. So if I could Ms. Hall-Rivera your response on both the implementation of breaking down barriers on aviation and getting the communication technology network up as soon as possible.

Ms. Hall-Rivera: Yes, Senator, thank you. For all those points, I would agree with all of them, we absolutely need to break down barriers with all of our partners, states, tribes, counties, even between the federal agencies, we are challenged at times, with some interoperability issues, maybe some different qualification standards, but we're on the same team. And fire doesn't know any boundaries. We've already heard that today. So we absolutely need to work to break down those barriers. I think we are, we're absolutely committed to that. And we can certainly bring some intention and focus to that in Washington state, if need be.

As far as the need to scale up prescribed fires and some of the challenges in doing so I think you captured that very well. Prescribed fire is absolutely critical to getting our landscapes back to a place where they can receive fire in a healthy way. It can be challenging to get windows to do that, especially in the summertime, as you pointed out. So we need to scale up that workforce, and we need to scale up the skill sets across not just the federal government but across partners so that we can get more prescribed by on the ground.

Sen. Cantwell: On the technology front, I want to know if the US Border Patrol recently equipped 19,000 agents with this gear without being obligated to do so. So if the US Border Patrol can do it, why can't we upgrade people right away with this gear?

Ms. Hall-Rivera: Yeah, thank you for that question. Senator, we are focused on getting tracking systems out. We have done a lot of pilot testing as a result of the Dingell act and we appreciate the focus and intention on this technology. We're going to be equipping our fire fleet with tracking devices this year. And we have a request for proposals coming out very soon so we can take advantage of those technology companies and what they have out in the marketplace, like you just mentioned with Border Patrol.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I think my colleague former colleague from Colorado and I worked very hard on this and we think it's long overdue to be implemented. I think this fire season we'll really want it to happen. And I certainly I don't know if I'm being followed by my colleague from Idaho, but there's good neighbor concept in general is about how do we get the front line -- we actually have maps where we can see right up to where the federal line is. Why? Because the county or the community brought in a response, but then all of a sudden couldn't cross the

federal lines. I think we need to think about how we're going to empower local communities to help us when these kinds of conditions are so drastic. And so I know my colleague from Idaho is working on that and will continue to dialogue with this committee. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.