

**Chairman Lisa Murkowski Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies**

**Hearing to review to Review the FY2017 Budget Request & Budget Justification
for the U.S. Forest Service**

April 6, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

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

We are here today to review the Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request for the Forest Service. Chief Tidwell, welcome back, and thank you for being here to testify. I'd also like to welcome Tony Dixon, who serves as the Director of the Office of Strategic Planning, Budget and Accountability at the Forest Service, and is accompanying the Chief today.

Now, to the budget request itself. The Forest Service has asked for \$4.8 billion for FY 2017. That is 13% or \$730 million less than the current enacted level, primarily because of the additional \$593 million Congress provided above the 10-year average for fire suppression in the event of a severe fire season in FY 2016.

Again, the Forest Service has requested an additional \$864 million for a wildfire disaster cap adjustment to bring the total fire spending authority at the agency to over \$1.7 billion.

I am pleased the request builds upon the increases the subcommittee included last year for hazardous fuels management. I also appreciate the funding proposed for the Forest Inventory Analysis program to continue to expand that program into interior Alaska. FIA provides critical information to states, industry, and other land managers on the health of all our nation's forests. And, I appreciate that this budget includes funding for subsistence programs, which are critical to managing the subsistence resource in Alaska.

But there are also things that I find concerning. As you know Chief, this Subcommittee is bound by the caps established by the Budget Control Act. Unfortunately, the President's Budget doesn't adhere to this reality and chose to put together a wish list of mandatory spending.

The budget requests \$128 million for federal land acquisition through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, \$62 million of which is proposed to be mandatory spending. Our nation's forests have dire management needs and rather than investing in them, this Administration has again prioritized land acquisition. It is baffling to me.

Chief, I have told you on more than one occasion that the hearings I've chaired with you feel like Groundhog Day. Unfortunately, today will be no exception. The progress on keeping the timber industry alive in Southeast Alaska is too little, but only too late if your policies continue on as they have been. During questions, I want to take the opportunity to follow-up on issues we discussed when you appeared before the Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

But I want to point out that it isn't only Southeast Alaska that is suffering. This budget is an example of how the Forest Service seems to be drifting away from being managed for multiple-use and sustained-yield, as well as basic forest management. The National Forest System budget activities, which represent the agency's most fundamental responsibilities, get a cut in your budget.

This is particularly frustrating in light of the manner in which the Administration continues to propose a wildfire cap adjustment that moves 30% of the cost of wildfires off-budget. This has purportedly been to allow the most devastating wildfires to be treated as disasters, while allowing the Forest Service to invest the "savings" into active forest management activities that your department has long indicated are necessary to reduce the costs associated with wildfire and increase forest health. Sadly, I don't see this playing out in the budget request. I know that the 10-year average has increased and that has to be accounted for in the budget request. Unfortunately, the "savings" you have requested to achieve that have resulted in a request that invests less than \$10 million more in fuels reduction and actually cuts federal forest management. This is disappointing and one of the primary reasons that I support the creation of a cap adjustment, as long as it is fiscally responsible and accompanied by meaningful forestry reforms.

I will continue to push for funding choices that allow us to have both healthy economies and healthy forests. And if we work toward that as our goal, we will solve many of the problems we currently face.

We wouldn't require hundreds of millions of dollars for subsidies to our logging communities. We could make great strides in reducing fuels loads on our federal forests. We could make advancements in technology that will result in commercial uses for currently non-merchantable timber. And most importantly, we could have thriving and healthy communities and forests.

Thank you again for being here today, Chief. I look forward to your testimony.