

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

Hearing to Review the FY2020 Budget Request for the U.S. Forest Service

May 15, 2019

(As delivered)

Today, we are reviewing the Fiscal Year 2020 budget proposal for the Forest Service. I'm pleased to welcome Chief Vicki Christiansen to testify before us today. I'm also welcoming John Rapp, who serves as the Acting Director of the Office of Strategic Planning, Budget and Accountability at the Forest Service, accompanying the Chief today. So thank you both for being here with us today.

The budget request for Forest Service for FY 2020 is \$5.14 billion. This request is \$947 million less than the enacted level, not including the \$1.95 billion proposed to be made available by the wildfire budget cap adjustment. Including the wildfire cap adjustment brings the overall Forest Service total to \$7.09 billion.

FY 2020 marks the first year of availability for the wildfire cap adjustment that was created by the FY 2018 Omnibus. The cap adjustment will allow the Forest Service to address fire suppression needs without disrupting programmatic activities. I am pleased that we have this mechanism available finally, to stop the fire borrowing and repayment cycle, as well as to stop the accompanying lack of budget certainty and discipline.

The creation of the wildfire cap adjustment is about more than just adequately funding wildfire suppression. It's about making sure the Forest Service can deliver on its multiple-use mission. Now that we have the ability to fund wildfire without fire borrowing, it's time for us to focus on working with the Service to modernize and improve your budget structure. Securing a cap adjustment was the first phase in increasing transparency and accountability for your budgeting practices, and the Forest Service took another important step by proposing a budget restructure in the request. I will discuss this further in my questions, but I want to thank you Chief and Mr. Rapp for your willingness to work in a bipartisan and a bicameral way to improve the Service's ability to deliver results on the ground.

The request places a heavy emphasis on Secretary Perdue's "Shared Stewardship" initiative. This approach recognizes that we can be better stewards of our natural resources if states, local governments, and stakeholders work together towards common goals. I do hope the Shared Stewardship initiative will really excel in improving wildfire resiliency in and around the wildland urban interface. Congress has routinely invested hundreds of millions of dollars annually in hazardous fuels reduction activities. I think we have some room for improvement here.

I am pleased the Forest Service recognizes the importance of investing in recreation funding. And as you know, Chief, many of our communities in Alaska rely on the recreation industry for economic diversity, particularly in the Southeast region. I am always disappointed to see subsistence activities cut in the budget request, and I want to go on record with my strong support for those activities.

The Tongass, the Tongass National Forest, our largest national forest, unique in character from any other, it is a rainforest made up of 32 island communities. To address our unique characteristics and the challenges they present to the people who live and work there, we've been working with you and the State of Alaska on a Tongass-specific Roadless Rule. So I want to take this opportunity to reiterate

yet again to you that every elected official representing Southeast Alaska supports an exemption: from the Governor to the state legislators, to the delegation here in Congress, this has never been a partisan issue for us. Alaskans know best what it takes to meet our needs and we need relief from the Roadless Rule as it currently stands. Without relief, our communities will continue to struggle to grow jobs and a sustainable economy that they desperately, desperately need. And as you continue to work with us on making the Tongass a working forest again, I do hope you will use it as an opportunity to put the model of shared stewardship to work.

So thank you. Thank you for being here today with us, Chief. I look forward to your testimony. Again thank you for your willingness to serve.

And with that I turn to my colleague Senator Udall.

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