

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

Review of the FY2018 Budget Request for the U.S. Forest Service

June 7, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

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

Today marks the first hearing of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee to review the President's Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request. Today, we will be reviewing the proposal for the Forest Service and I'm pleased to welcome back Chief Tom Tidwell to testify before us. I'd also like to welcome Sheri Elliot, who serves as the Acting Director of the Office of Strategic Planning, Budget and Accountability at the Forest Service, and is accompanying the Chief today. Thank you both for being here.

As a reminder, we'll adhere to the "early bird rule" for recognizing members for questions. I will call on members in the order they arrive, going back and forth between the majority and the minority. We'll do six-minute rounds of questions. It's my hope that we'll be able to do 2 to 3 rounds of questions in an effort to give everyone an opportunity to address the issues they wish to raise.

Now, to the budget request itself.

The budget request for the Forest Service for FY 2018 is \$4.7 billion. This is \$880 million less than FY2017, when you factor in the \$342 million in emergency funding Congress provided above the 10-year average in the event of a severe fire season.

The request for the Wildland Fire management program is \$2.495 billion, with fire suppression funded at the full 10-year average of \$1.057 billion. The budget does not propose a wildfire cap adjustment or any type of "fix" for fire borrowing. However, buried in the proposal is a statement that the Administration "will work with the Congress during the 2018 budget cycle to develop a responsible approach that addresses risk management, performance accountability, cost containment, and the role of State and local government partners in ensuring adequate funds are available for wildfire suppression without undue disruption to land management operations."

As you are painfully aware Chief, the cycle of borrowing and repayment and the accompanying lack of budget certainty and discipline is not helping to improve the health of our nation's forests.

I'm pleased that this Administration recognizes this problem and look forward to working with the Forest Service and the Office of Management and Budget to address this issue during this budget cycle in a fiscally responsible and politically feasible way.

Chief, this budget request is very different from the previous Administration's proposals for your agency. Rather than a wish-list of spending paid for with budget gimmicks, this budget proposes real cuts to programs. The worthiness of the cuts runs the gamut. Some are worth consideration, some are troubling, and some are in direct contradiction to other proposals in the budget.

For example, the timber target is again set at 3.2 billion board feet, a level that isn't as high as I'd like to see it. But, I'm concerned that the 73% proposed cut to Capital Improvement and Maintenance will make that target difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Without adequate funding for road maintenance and construction the agency will be unable to provide necessary access for timber purchasers while also meeting legally required environmental standards. I'm also concerned about the impacts of these proposed cuts on many other forest management activities – from firefighting to hazardous fuels reduction.

The request acknowledges that it is the primary responsibility of the Forest Service to manage the national forests. When making tough funding decisions, we need to make certain we are meeting our basic forest health needs before we invest in other programs. While many of the funding levels are lower than I'd like, I appreciate that this budget proposal makes investing in national forest management needs its top priority.

I am pleased the request recognizes the importance of hazardous fuels management and I am eager to hear more about the proposal to move the funding for that activity out of the fire program and into the National Forest System account.

I am concerned, however, by the \$12 million dollar reduction to the recreation programs. Many communities rely on this program to help diversify their economies, particularly in Southeast Alaska.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Secretary Perdue this morning and discuss his vision for the Forest Service. Given the importance of the agency to the people and economy of Alaska, I'm hopeful that under his leadership the Forest Service will do more to make our forests the economic engines they should be. Not just in Alaska, but in the lower 48, as well. While Alaska paints a very stark picture of the need for robust and responsible uses of our national forests, the need is nationwide. Recreation, tourism, and forest products can and must coexist for us to have thriving and healthy communities and forests. This will take not only financial investments, but substantial leadership investments as well, and I hope the Forest Service is prepared to dedicate the time and energy required to make this vision a reality.

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

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