



June 10, 2016

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senate
SH-709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
U.S. Senate
SH-511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi
U.S. Senate
SR-379A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
U.S. Senate
SR-154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Murkowski, Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Ranking Member Murray:

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is composed of the directors of forestry agencies in the 50 states, eight territories and the District of Columbia. Collectively these member organizations have responsibility for forest and fire management on almost two-thirds of America's forests, or 500 million acres. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion draft. Resolving fire funding challenges and enhancing active forest management are top priorities for the forestry community. In this letter we want to: 1) note the most helpful aspects; 2) describe an important change which we believe is needed and 3) request a meeting to discuss specific details and potential modest additions.

First we want to thank you for your leadership in trying to find a solution to the wildfire funding challenges faced by the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior as well as providing responsible fire suppression language and forest management provisions which will help facilitate more active forest management.

Helpful aspects. In terms of fire transfers and borrowing, NASF much appreciates the draft bill language which will curtail this late season practice. As Alaska State Forester Chris Maisch mentioned at a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee field hearing on May 31, 2016 in Kenai, Alaska, this practice has deleterious impacts on the agency's ability to develop partnerships and accomplish on the ground work as we have seen the agency cancel contracts with key partners, or send seasonal employees home in mid-summer who were engaged in important resource work. The agency continues to take these actions in order to pay the anticipated fire suppression bill for that season. Per language in this bill, that practice would end.

NASF also appreciates many of the forest management and fire operation provisions and believe they will add to enhanced fire fighter safety as well as more active forest management, ultimately reducing the impacts of wildfires. For example: 1) The suggested efforts at streamlining the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis for priority

projects that address wild land fire issues by limiting alternatives to a no-action and recommended action analysis should streamline the process and save both time and funding for agency planning staff. 2) Requiring agencies to work with states on an equal footing on fire aviation issues is a positive step, especially since eighty percent of the nation's wildfires are on state and private lands. 3) Allowing unspent funds in a "good fire season" to be used for fuels works represents another positive step to minimize the impacts of catastrophic wildfire.

Important change needed. In recent years, the portion of the Forest Service's overall budget allocated to fire programs has significantly grown. As more funding is allocated to fight fires, less is allocated to other areas of the Forest Service budget. Agency staff have noted that the trend is a 100 million dollar reduction per year in funding available for non-fire suppression programs, including critical fuels and forestry work which would minimize wildfire impacts, and the host of critical forestry programs important to the management of the nation's state and private trees and forests. Suppressing fires is becoming more expensive and complex as a result of issues including prolonged drought, lack of active forest management, and more people moving into Wild land Urban Interface (WUI) areas. Fire costs accounted for 16 percent of the Forest Service's total budget in fiscal year (FY) 1995, grew to over 50 percent in FY 2015 and are expected to continue to increase.

There is a critical need to find a way to access disaster funding to pay for catastrophic (large, costly, extreme) wildfires - placing these fires on par with other natural disasters or fund wild fire suppression beyond a certain limit in increasingly challenging wild fire years. The two legislative proposals which we understand have been considered are either funding above a fixed fire suppression appropriation amount through: 1) a budget cap adjustment or 2) the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund. NASF does not have a preference in how this challenge is resolved, only that it is resolved.

Specific details and modest additions. We would also like an opportunity to visit with the Committee to discuss technical legislative language adjustments such as those related to fire aviation credentialing and community planning for at-risk communities which could potentially avoid unintended negative consequences. We would also appreciate an opportunity to provide additional recommendations for environmentally responsible forest management measures which would yield significant benefits for America's forests.

Again we appreciate the opportunity to provide comment on the proposal and look forward to working with the Committee as this critical legislation moves forward.

Sincerely,



Paul DeLong
President, National Association of State Foresters
State Forester of Wisconsin

Executive Director
Jay Farrell

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