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## Senate committee hears testimony on wildfire budgeting and management draft

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The Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources convened to receive testimony on the Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act (S. \_\_\_\_ ) put forward by Chairman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA).

This new bipartisan legislation would end the practice of borrowing funds from non-fire accounts, a process known as ‘fire-borrowing’, by enabling a transfer of limited funds to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) through a budget cap adjustment when all appropriated suppression funding (100 percent of the 10-year average) is exhausted. It would also allow the agencies to invest excess suppression funding in fuel reduction efforts to reduce the threat of future wildfires. The Obama Administration and others, including Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, believe the draft fails to solve the underlying problem: the rising cost of wildfires, which now consumes more than half of USFS’s budget. The Obama Administration also called for better fire management and resiliency plans, proposing one solution that would appropriate only 70 percent of the 10-year average for fire suppression, use emergency funds to cover additional needs, and leave the remaining 30 percent for proactive forest management.

The hearing also addressed the Tongass National Forest Plan Amendment, which would authorize a comprehensive inventory of young-growth timber in the Tongass National Forest prior to forest management plan revisions. Although Bonnie claimed that an inventory of that scale is “unnecessary to arrive at a decision on planning,” Chairman Murkowski sent a strong message that the Committee only had “one chance to get it right” to save the forest.

Sources: E&E Daily, Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources, Tongass Advisory Committee

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