

Wildfires emerging as a hot topic on the Hill

August 3, 2017

As the U.S. endures another fire season, legislators on the Hill are seeking to address some of the challenges associated with managing wildland fires on federal land. A hearing held by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on August 3 tackled the complex challenges in reducing wildland fire risk, focusing primarily on wildfire management programs and technologies.

The hearing discussed the collaboration that is required to reduce risks to firefighters, communities, and resources, and covered the emerging technological and budgeting hurdles facing wildfire management. Committee Chair Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA) both expressed support for implementing new technologies such as drones and tanker aircrafts to fight fires more efficiently, and weather models to better predict fire behavior.

Republicans and Democrats agree that funding is one of the main obstacles to effective wildfire management, and have introduced legislation this year to address the financial burden. The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) Reauthorization Act of 2017 (S.1571), which was introduced by Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID) in July and cosponsored by Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH), includes a provision to classify procedure for the declaration of wildfires as major disasters. This new requirement would allow the U.S. Forest Service to use disaster relief funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) when fighting fires, thus reducing or ending the practice of “fire borrowing” wherein the U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior (DOI) utilize funds from non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression activities. The Senate has not taken action yet on the bill.

Sources: Library of Congress, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
