

# OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

September 11, 2015

Senator Maria Cantwell  
511 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator John Barrasso  
307 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Cantwell and Barrasso,

On behalf of the outdoor recreation community in the Pacific Northwest, Outdoor Alliance would like to express our sincere gratitude for your continued efforts to address wildfire issues and for holding the recent field hearing at Seattle University. As you know, wildfires routinely have serious negative impacts on funding for outdoor recreation and maintenance of our public lands

The outdoor recreation community has a significant interest in the funding that land management agencies have available, both for wildfire suppression and for programs that benefit outdoor recreation. Our activities are both affected by wildfires and require investments, including trail maintenance and active land management, and each year our public lands are increasingly affected by “megafires,” which have all of the destructive qualities of other natural disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes.

For years, both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have had to transfer money from other programs to fight fires. The worst result might be the vicious cycle created by depleting funds for work to mitigate the risk of fires in order to pay for fire suppression.

But recreation programs in particular are also negatively affected. Agency programs that benefit recreation often happen in the summer season, putting recreation budgets on a collision course with fire suppression costs. Every summer, many of the resources set aside for program delivery benefitting recreation get diverted to fight fires.

While the funds transferred are significant, the effect of staff transfers is perhaps even greater. During fire season, seasonal and yearly staff are often diverted to fight fires, leaving trail and other projects postponed or scrapped altogether. Similarly, valuable collaboration and planning efforts can be set back a full year or more when staff time is transferred.

Finally, the impacts on recreation go beyond funding and staffing transfers, and can last for years after a fire. Many times burnt areas remain closed to recreation access because there is no funding available for crews to reopen them. All of these on-the-ground impacts of this budgeting issue, including reduced program delivery, diverted staff time and shortchanged restoration, are costly and avoidable.



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The 2015 wildfire season in Washington has been the worst on record, with almost 1 million acres currently burning. The impact this is having on our land managers shows – Okanagan Wenatchee National Forest closed a large section of the Forest north of Highway 2 not because of eminent fire danger, but simply because they didn't have the resources to keep areas open. A specific example of this impact from one of our member organizations is that The Mountaineers, after much work as an organization to come under permit in the Wenatchee River District of OWNF, has yet to actually receive a permit for course activity in Leavenworth. The Wenatchee River District never has the resources to issue the permit that the organization is operating under and paying for.

In order to protect other critical agency programs, including those that benefit recreation, extreme wildfires should be declared natural disasters, and excess fire suppression costs should be treated differently. Agencies should not have to dig a hole in vital program budgets to fill a hole in fire suppression funds.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter for westerners, outdoor recreationists, and all Americans who care about their public lands.

Best regards,



Adam Cramer  
Executive Director  
Outdoor Alliance

cc:

Brady Robinson, Executive Director, Access Fund  
Wade Blackwood, Executive Director, American Canoe Association  
Mark Singleton, Executive Director, American Whitewater  
Michael Van Abel, Executive Director, International Mountain Bicycling Association  
Mark Menlove, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance  
Martinique Grigg, Executive Director, The Mountaineers  
Phil Powers, Executive Director, American Alpine Club  
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Thomas O'Keefe, Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director, American Whitewater  
Louis Geltman, Policy Counsel, Outdoor Alliance

