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**Colloquy on Wildfire Funding
 Between Senators Enzi, Wyden, Murkowski, Cantwell,
 Crapo, McCain, Flake, Barrasso, Merkley & Daines and Tester
 August 6, 2015**

Mr. Enzi: Mr. President, Congress needs to find a fiscally-responsible solution to wildfire funding and fire borrowing. While the Forest Service still has half a billion dollars remaining for fire suppression, there are years when firefighting costs exceed predicted funding levels. We need a focused discussion on this issue and I plan to begin the conversation with key offices and states - Wyoming, Oregon, Idaho, Arizona, Alaska, Washington, California, Nevada, Montana, Colorado, and others that would like to join and will be constructive to its resolution. I know there are differences of opinion out there as to how to solve this problem, but the key to solving it is getting everyone in a room to discuss it. As cap adjustments are under the jurisdiction of the Budget Committee, I look forward to working with my colleagues on a durable and long-lasting solution that fits our fiscal priorities and is responsible budgeting.

Mr. Wyden: Mr. President, I agree with the Senator from Wyoming that we need to find a solution to this problem and I have introduced legislation with Senator Crapo that currently sits in the Budget Committee. Oregon is on fire and the Forest Service tells me that with current fire seasons getting longer and current budgetary constraints the days of spending over 50 percent of their budget on suppressing fires is here to stay. The time for talking is coming to an end and the time to negotiate a fix to this very serious problem is at hand. I would like to work under the leadership of my friend, the Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, over the summer, on an answer to this chronic problem.

Ms. Cantwell: Mr. President, I agree with the Senator from Wyoming. Senator Murkowski and I have been working together to propose a solution to this problem as well, and I am proud to be able to say that we have been working with Senator Enzi, Senator Wyden, and our other colleagues. We have to enable the Forest Service to have both the resources it needs to deal with wildfires, but also the resources it needs to manage the National Forests. The current system of paying for wildfires by, perpetually, taking funding away from the programs that enable the Agency to maintain recreation facilities and complete important restoration projects is simply unacceptable. We can't sit idle and expect this budget issue to fix itself. We all agree a budget cap adjustment of some sort is the solution needed to end the practice of fire borrowing. I appreciate Senator Wyden's efforts to fix this problem, and I appreciate Senator Murkowski's recent work to fix this problem. Most of these solutions have the common theme of requiring a budget cap adjustment, and we are looking to your leadership, Senator Enzi to assist us with that. People's homes are burning because of these wildfires. We need to get the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior the money they need to respond to wildfires, but we also need to ensure the money is being well spent. We have a number of ideas to round out the solution. I will be working over the summer with my colleagues to develop comprehensive legislation that solves this budget problem, but also ensures we see fewer large wildfires and fewer houses being lost to them. Our solution, and I want to emphasize *our*, will be a solution that is easy to explain to the public and that is able to get to the President's desk to be enacted.

Ms. Murkowski: Mr. President: I want to thank the Chairman of the Budget Committee for his leadership on the important issue of wildfire budgeting. I think we all agree that the way wildfire management has been funded is broken and that it is past time that we fix it. Earlier this year, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee that I Chair reported the Interior Appropriations bill. My bill provided full funding for the average annual cost of fire fighting over the past ten years, and included a limited cap adjustment to access disaster relief funding only if the agencies exhaust 100 percent of that 10-year average of wildfire suppression funds. This proposal would end the disruptive and unsustainable practice of borrowing from, and later repaying money to, other government programs to deal with fire emergencies, while also providing up front the resources the agencies need to fight fires in all but the most extreme years. But there is more to the issue of wildfire budgeting as my colleague, Senator Cantwell points out. We need to ensure the dollars Congress appropriates are well spent. Senator Cantwell has some good ideas on how to do that. I stand ready to work with my colleagues to advance a solution that will finally fix this long-standing problem in a fiscally responsible manner.

Mr. Crapo: Mr. President, I rise to support the Senator from Wyoming's efforts to address budgetary issues impacting how our nation fights wildfires. Like the State of Wyoming, Idaho's forested lands are consistently under threat of catastrophic wildfires. According to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, in the last year alone there were 1,456 wildland fires in Idaho that burned 714,057 acres. As more resources go toward fire suppression, resources that could be used to implement projects that improve forest health, benefit forest communities and enhance public safety are squeezed. We know that wildfires are going to continue to be a threat, and we can better prepare for the increasing costs of wildland fire management by making needed changes that will support the preparation of firefighters and land managers. That is why I partnered with Senator Ron Wyden in introducing legislation, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, to provide for more efficient and effective fire management. I look forward to working with my

colleagues across the West, and in the Senate Budget Committee in particular, on legislation that would better budget for our nation's fire suppression activities.

Mr. McCain: Mr. President, I want to commend the Budget Committee Chairman for his ongoing efforts to tackle the fire-borrowing issue. We all agree that the Forest Service should receive the funding it needs to fight fires. I'm also glad that there is growing agreement that the Forest Service should budget for 100% of its wildfire suppression costs as proposed in legislation introduced by me and my colleagues, Senator Flake and Senator Barrasso. We also know that science has shown how forest restoration is highly effective in reducing wildfire severity. I look forward to working with Senator Wyden and the Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee on an agreeable solution that protects wildfire prevention and wildfire suppression as the two top priorities of the Forest Service.

Mr. Flake: Mr. President, there is wide agreement that the current wildfire funding system is broken. There is no doubt that wildfires are disastrous and the cost to suppress them continues to grow. But we cannot let the costly and disastrous nature of wildfire make us lose sight that many of the costs of fighting fire can be anticipated. Like Senator McCain, I am pleased that there is growing consensus that the fiscally responsible way to deal with these wildfires is to allow access to additional funds through a limited process only after agencies have been appropriated for one-hundred percent of the anticipated costs of suppression. I look forward to working with my colleagues on enacting this funding fix as well as incorporating provisions that ease the removal of the hazardous fuels that create fire-prone landscapes.

Mr. Barrasso: Mr. President, I want to thank the Senior Senator from Wyoming and Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee for his steadfast approach to addressing budget priorities in a responsible and fiscally sound manner. There is bipartisan agreement to end the practice of fire borrowing. If Congress is going to consider budgetary cap adjustments under the jurisdiction of the Budget Committee, the Forest Service should first budget for one-hundred percent of its wildfire suppression costs before cap adjustments are made. In order to bring down the long term cost of wildfire suppression, Congress should also actively engage in supporting activities which reduce the cost and severity of wildfire such as hazardous fuels treatments, thinning, and other active forest management projects. I have joined with Senators McCain and Flake on legislation to address these issues. I have also put forward legislation to treat more acres to improve forest health and reduce the risk of wildfire. I want to work with my colleagues in the Senate, and specifically Chairman Enzi, to prevent future fire borrowing and reduce the long-term economic and ecological costs associated with wildfires.

Mr. Merkley: Mr. President, yesterday, the Forest Service announced that for the first time in its 110 year history, it is spending more than 50% of its budget just to fight wildfires. The Forest Service expects this problem to keep getting worse. Within a decade, they are projecting that firefighting costs will rise to two thirds of the Forest Service budget. The Forest Service can no longer sustain these costs of fighting wildfires while continuing other critical functions of managing our federal forests. It's long overdue that Congress eliminate the vicious cycle of fire borrowing, where the Forest Service is forced to dig further and further into its budget to fight fires at the expense of critical work to reduce hazardous fuels from the forest and other forest management. Mr. President I am very grateful that we have such a strong bipartisan group of

colleagues working together on this critical matter. I thank my colleagues who are joining me today, and I note that it is this kind of bipartisan cooperation that gets the issues done, along with the strong leadership of Senator Wyden who has championed this issue with a bi-partisan bill for the last two congresses, in addition to the strong leadership of Senator Murkowski which allowed us to take a big step in the right direction in the Interior Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2016. It is crucial to our communities facing threats of wildfire that we keep this cooperation going. I will keep working with my colleagues to solve this urgent budgetary crisis.

Mr. Daines: I want to thank Chairman Enzi for his commitment to solving the wildfire funding challenge that is increasingly forcing the Forest Service to spend more of its budget suppressing fires rather than preventing them through enhanced management. Like many other Western states, Montana has already experienced several high-intensity fires this year. The fire season thus far has been one of the worst in the past decade and has only made more evident the urgent need for a wildfire funding solution. As a cosponsor of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, I believe it is critical that Congress end fire borrowing and ensure that the Forest Service can spend more of its budget on making our National Forests more resilient to fire, while also equipping the agency with the tools and authorities it needs to restore active management. I look forward to working with Chairman Enzi, other Budget Committee members, and fellow colleagues to find consensus on these high-priority reforms.

Mr. Tester: Mr. President, I join my colleagues in wanting to fix the way we fund fire. We have to start using common sense and budget for catastrophic wildfires like we do for other natural disasters. Unfortunately, due to Congressional inaction and growing costs associated with fighting wildfires, the Forest Service is increasingly turning into a firefighting agency. This means fewer resources for smart public land management. Montana's national forests benefit our outdoor recreation economy, support timber jobs in rural communities, and preserve the drinking water that Montanans rely on. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to address both the issues of fire borrowing and the increasing costs of fighting fires. The Forest Service cannot continue to absorb these increasing costs without undermining other critical priorities, from timber harvest and research to conservation and recreation management. There is real bipartisan support for getting something done on this issue and I am confident a growing number of our colleagues will join us as we push forward this fall.