

Kelly Coughlin, Wildland Firefighter/Fire Lookout Testimony

Good afternoon Committee Chair Senator Dembrow, members of the Committee,

My name is Kelly Coughlin and I am a Wildland Firefighter, Fire Lookout and Public Information Officer with US department of the Interior. I submit this testimony as an individual. I am from Coos Bay, a small coastal timber town. I worked 7 years on the Rogue River in the Siskiyou National Forest, with US Forest Service, and during fire season I can be deployed all over the country, depending on where wildfires are.

In the sixteen years I've been fighting fires, I've participated in the largest fires in the histories of three different states, as well as been active during the terrible summer of 2011 in Central Texas, as temperatures reached over 100 degrees for over 100 days during one of their worst fire seasons to date.

From my vantage point, as a wildland firefighter and someone who has served in the same fire lookout for many years, I can see the seasons are shifting. I've fought fire in Colorado, Oregon, Michigan, Nevada and Washington. Observing weather and fire patterns all over the Pacific Northwest and the Great basin, it has appeared that climate patterns are changing.

When I started my fire career in 2001, the West was at the tail end of what they were calling an eight-year drought cycle. There has been an emerging trend toward larger fires, with more extreme, unpredictable fire behavior. It's now 2017 and drought conditions persist; it seems what was once a fairly predictable cycle, is now part of a new reality. In 2015, for the first time in its 110-year history, the U.S. Forest Service spent more than 50% of its annual budget on firefighting at the expense of other programs. Just 20 years ago, firefighting made up only 16% of the annual budget for the Forest Service.¹

This is more than a drought cycle; years of warmer temperatures, lower snowpack, and attendant mass bug killed timber – due to climate change – all compound to create dangerous conditions for our firefighters, more days of unhealthy air for our most vulnerable community members, and a major threat to the way of life for those who live nearby. At a time when we need firefighters more than ever, some may decide the job is just too dangerous.

¹ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/08/05/firefighting-costs-soar-blazes-worsen-west/31153701/>

So we need to address the root causes of what is changing the environment and making work more dangerous for wildland firefighters. We need to cut climate changing pollution with a cap on pollution and reinvestment in solutions.

As someone who loves the forest, the changes I've seen – both the subtle and the striking – are heartbreaking to witness. It's going to take all of us to stop climate change and keep our forests safe.