

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Hearing on the President's Budget Request
May 13, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Q&A with U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Obviously, there's a lot going on in the West, and fire season as we get these predictions are always very dramatic for us. You know, any kind of drier years, you have less snowpack, you have less water.

By August, the entire state of Washington – I think this is the August prediction here, which includes my colleague from Idaho, as he was just discussing – [will be] under, you know, very serious fire threat. But I'm very concerned, because we don't seem to be prepared on the front lines here.

Because of the new restrictions on the Department of Agriculture's grants and contracts, the state of Washington cannot release \$49 million in funding to help fight fires and manage our forests. That includes \$28 million in Community Wildfire Defense Grants, and means [the] Spokane Valley Fire [Department] has not received over \$5 million to prepare for wildfire[s].

And the reason that's so dangerous is we had – just on the other side of Spokane – a very devastating fire a couple of years ago. Literally, some people have said Spokane could be the first major city [to experience a major fire]. And then we obviously had the Palisades fire. Now we have a Spokane Valley Fire [Department] person saying we are trying to avoid being the Palisades.

And yet they're not getting the money to help alleviate this risk. Okanagan [County] has not received \$4 million to reduce hazardous trees and clear vegetation along 180 miles of fire-prone lines in places like Twisp and Winthrop, where we had the Carlton Complex Fire. So that was devastating.

Wildfires have burned approximately 59% of the Methow Valley watershed [and] destroyed homes. In addition, thousands of dollars of fire assistance and state fire grants are being held up. 84% of the fire departments in the state of Washington are partly or entirely volunteer. So this is lifeline money for these individuals.

I think, in addition, hundreds of thousands of hazardous fuels reduction [funds] are not going out to these communities, and then the state can't do the forest work because the \$6 million in the Good Neighbor Authority funds aren't moving.

So these are various programs that help us reduce this [wildfire] risk that we know is coming. So how can we get your commitment to reverse that and get this money out the door?

Chief Schultz: Mr. Chairman, Senator Cantwell: so as I've mentioned, we've been working extensively with the states on this issue. Many of the states have since signed agreements after we've walked through and explained things. There's been multiple webinars with the states. We're working with [the

National Association of State Foresters] (NASF) and your state forester as well. George Geissler has been at the table in discussion on this.

So I'm confident, with regard specifically to firefighting, we have a master agreement – that is, we have a deviation from that process that will extend through the rest of the year. So in terms of firefighting capacity, that is not being impacted. When it comes to local grant money –

Sen. Cantwell: Well, wait. The dollars aren't out the door. So, when are the dollars going to be out the door? That's what I want to know, because paperwork isn't what we need right now. These are funds that flow every year normally, but now aren't flowing. And I would say the risk is only increased.

I just need a commitment from you that this is going to get resolved and the money is going to get out the door soon.

Chief Schultz: We're working to resolve it right now.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, what will resolve it?

Chief Schultz: So part of it is, there is litigation by some states on some of these issues. So some of this is in the courts. The states can sign these agreements tomorrow, if they choose to sign them.

Sen. Cantwell: What agreements? Your new terms? I'm saying, what's different from where we've been before, and why are we having this problem now. Where are these funds are being held up?

I'm sure it's the terms that you guys have put in place – the terms and conditions. And so now I'm trying to say, are you going to resolve that? Or are you going to say, yes, it's going to get holed up in a legal battle because I put out new terms and conditions.

Chief Schultz: Mr. Chairman, Senator Cantwell: we are working through this issue. Literally most days this week, we're having discussions with the state foresters, including the state of Washington, to work through these issues.

I don't have a resolution date just yet. Like I said, we've resolved probably seven or eight of the main issues that have been identified by the states, and there's still a handful of other issues that are still out there. We're still working on, but we're working and we're committed to getting this.

Sen. Cantwell: What are you still working on?

Chief Schultz: We're explaining the rationale behind the terms and conditions.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, I was just telling you – I don't like the terms and conditions because the money isn't flowing in a fire year that is growing in intensity. I'm just saying I need a commitment that you're going to resolve those.

If you're going to keep pushing on terms and conditions that stop fire preparation dollars that have historically been distributed from being distributed, I think you need to tell the committee why you're doing that, and why it should be held up.

I also have a question for the record, Mr. Chairman, because I can see my time has expired. Where are the Seattle and Wenatchee lab capabilities going to be headquartered? These are the science issues that [revolve] around our Northwest forest and if you have a quick answer for that right now, yes, go ahead.

Chief Schultz: So Mr. Chairman, Sen. Cantwell: there's been a lot of questions about the 57 sites that we've identified, which included the Wenatchee site that you're mentioning. Specifically on the Wenatchee site, we have not made any determinations of closing any facilities yet. We're evaluating those.

The Wenatchee site actually has six buildings on it, and there's a forest supervisor's office about 10 miles down the road. We're actually looking at relocating the forest supervisor's office, which is in a lease, probably to that Wenatchee site.

So we have not made any determinations about closing facilities. We're evaluating all of the facilities right now to make sure that we can maintain the appropriate footprint for research within the budgets that we have.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I do need answers to the first question, and soon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.