U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Roundtable on Extreme Weather

August 4, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Q&A with Panelists

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Senator Welch, for your leadership in getting this together. And obviously, my heart goes out to the people of Washington who are dealing with this across our state, particularly in Spokane, and in the Lake Chelan area as well.

But I think between Washington and Oregon, we've hit a record for the amount of acreage that has been burning, and so that is a new milestone.

And I guess Mr. Smith or [Mr.] Gaughan, having been involved in this issue for a long time – we do have a Weather Act Reauthorization, [and] we have a bill, Fire Ready Nation, and we've sent the president a five-point plan about modernizing weather data, infrastructure analytics on a worldwide basis, supporting cutting-edge research, modernizing alert and communication system, and in reauthorizing the Weather Act – I feel like technology can play a big role.

And yet it's like we have to show people the connection between the information that we can get and then the actual action plan that we can put into place – that's where the gaps are. Now, I'm not saying that you can deal with 50 mile-an-hour winds on a hot, no humidity day, and obviously there is someone in our state who is now under arrest for maybe starting one of the fires.

So, the question I have for you is – we had a tragic event where we didn't have a Doppler [radar] covering our coast and we basically had 100-year [weather] event happen and we lost lives and [had] lots of property damage. And finally we got a new Doppler system to actually effectuate that [forecast].

But when I was out there with all these scientists, I said, "Well, this is great. Now we have the problem solved." They were like, "No." I was like, "What do you mean, no?" And they said, "Every particle in a storm can be its own algorithm, and we're just not using the supercomputing time to calculate the possibilities of what that might be."

That is why we all hear on TV about the European model because they actually are using their supercomputing time on this weather forecasting and then getting data and information. I know we're here to talk about fire today, and trust me, we have probably one of the worst fire seasons in our state's history going on right now.

So, what do you think: is it we just don't understand the technology opportunities or is it we ~~didn't~~ don't translate this technology into actual action plans – or it's never really going to be able to give us the ability?

I also just want to point out, my colleagues who are here have authored requests to [the Government Accountability Office] (GAO) for over the last, I think might be 8 to 10 years, [asking] how much is climate change costing the federal government? And definitely, the first report was in the billions of dollars.

The second report that we did just recently, in the last I think two or three years, it was in the trillions of dollars. So, taxpayers should know that climate change is costing our government this much money, and we're not doing anything to mitigate or adapt, and so I do want to consider that.

So where does technology fit in helping to solve the problems, and or is it going to be limited in its abilities? And what else should we be doing? Whoever wants to answer that.

Michael Gaughan – Vermont Bond Bank: I'm happy to answer that from kind of more of a global perspective. In my comments earlier in this discussion, I mentioned that we are experimenting and investigating parametric insurance, and that oftentimes is based on a trigger that is based on some meteorological data.

What we are finding is that as we investigate this, the sources we need are largely private, and so as we think about data and making it accessible and transparent and hopefully free, that's very important for our own work at building financial resiliency in Vermont.

Adam Smith – Climate Central: Yeah, I would like to echo your comment. So indeed, over the last 10 years, wildfires as a hazard has gone up more exponentially than any other hazard in the United States. It used to be sub $10 billion per year up to about 2016, and from 2017, 2018, 2020, 2025 with the LA wildfires, you're in the tens to hundreds of billions [of dollars] just from direct losses.

You talk about indirect losses, and it continues to exponentiate. So I think that that is the correct question to ask, particularly out West where the wildfires have been so destructive. And again, even Hawaii – it's part of the Western problem. I think I would defer to our captain on the wildfire solutions.

Chief Bob Roper – Western Fire Chiefs Association: So, where we're going right now with the technology and what needs to be done, we have found that across the country is that we don't have good data standards.

We're not sharing data widely, and that there's not an orchestrated plan on what to do with the data and intelligence, and this is where we strongly believe that what's contained in [the Fix Our Forests Act] (FOFA) and the other bills that infer about creating a national intelligence center that can be a day and night difference in how we interpret data, share data, and act on data that we haven't had in the past.

Right now, a lot of the data that is out there is out in Boise at [the National Interagency Fire Center] (NIFC), but it's seen as a federal-centric tool and not down to the local level.

So, [when] we deal with wildfires now, what we really want to do is make sure – the fires don't respect jurisdictional lines. We need to make sure that federal, state, tribal, and public and private [sectors] are all working collectively together as far as one entity.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Chief. I would just say that my young colleague in the state [of Washington], State Senator Marcus Riccelli, had planned to have a town meeting today on the lack of insurance available for people in Spokane, but he can't hold that meeting. He was evacuated from his own home.

We just have to move faster. We have to use these opportunities with intelligence and other [opportunities] to figure out how to move faster because we definitely are seeing the growing impacts. Thank you.