

**Testimony
By
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**Chairman, Board of Commissioners
Snoqualmie Pass Fire & Rescue**

Before

**The Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
U.S. Senate**

**Room 366 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, D.C.
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2:30 p.m.**

Hello, my name is Chris Caviezel. I am the Chairman of the Board of Fire Commissioners for Snoqualmie Pass Fire & Rescue, a volunteer fire department serving the greater Snoqualmie Pass community in the State of Washington

This un-incorporated area has 350 full-time residents. In addition, we have a winter-time ski area which sees an estimated 20,000 people a day during the peak of the season. The Washington State Department of Transportation also estimates that up to 60,000 vehicles will travel through our fire district on a busy day, tying us as the most heavily traveled mountain pass highway in the country.

Snoqualmie Pass has an enormous amount of snowfall with an average of 32 feet of snow each year over the last ten years, which makes the region an appealing destination recreational area. However, this also results in avalanches and rock slides on both sides of the pass creating difficult accessibility and emergency service issues.

These unique demographics challenge local resources to the limits. Our Fire Department averages over 300 calls a year and is seeing a nearly 10 percent annual increase in call volumes.

Snoqualmie Pass is completely surrounded by Forest Service land. To the North and South of us are the Cascade Mountains and along the Interstate-90 corridor, Forest Service Land extends to the east and west of us, well beyond our 7-1/2 mile response area in each direction.

While our primary mission is to fight fires and provide emergency medical services in our local residential setting and nearby inter-state highway – the impacts of the surrounding Forest Service Land definitely affect our mission. The Forest Service has the primary responsibility for putting fires out on their land, however, the nearest Forest Service resources are nearly 30 miles away in the town of North Bend. And though Snoqualmie Pass's all volunteer fire station is not obligated to respond to any fires on Forest Service Land, we gladly do so. We are usually the ones in the position to get to the fire first, giving us a better chance at containing the fire before it can get out of hand and present a much larger problem.

It is also important to note that our all-volunteer fire department must respond quickly to prevent fire from spreading on to Forest Service Land. The nearest career department is also in North Bend and during a recent fire we have had support come to us from over an hour away.

Two years ago our Fire Department was contacted by the Forest Service to ask if we would be interested in purchasing the land that we currently lease. We were very surprised because we did not know it was possible to acquire Forest Service Land. Yes, we were interested, but no, we did not have the money.

Through a series of discussions with the Forest Service, we also learned that there is a different parcel of land that they would be willing to consider. This other parcel would allow us to build a new station with less impact to current operations and the new location, due to its location and accessibility, would meet all of our operational needs. Also, it should be noted, that the land that we desire is a parking lot used occasionally in the winter. From a wildlife connectivity standpoint, the MP 53 location would be located exactly half way in between the wildlife crossing at MP 54.5 that DOT is scheduled to build in the near future as part of the highway re-construction and the connectivity corridor proposed at MP 51.5 in the USDA Forest Service report by Singleton and Lehmkuhl (2000)

We have long recognized the pressing need to build a new fire station. Our current Fire Station was originally built in the 1930's as a maintenance shed for the Department of Transportation. The current station has numerous safety, utility, structural, and operational deficiencies that can not be resolved in the existing structure. One problem of note is that, due to the slope of the roof, it sheds snow in front of the apparatus bays. This is especially significant when we are dispatched for an emergency. The Fire Station siren sounds when we get a call, which can trigger the release of the snow off the roof, leaving up to a four foot ridge of snow and ice in front of our rigs preventing a response until the path is cleared.

Over the past 12 years we have looked at numerous properties and have determined that this property fits our needs best because it is centrally located, easily accessible to east and west bound Interstate-90, as well as Highway 906. The centrality of this site not only provides for faster, more efficient responses once the apparatus are on the road, but it also allows the volunteers to travel to the station quicker for a shorter turnout time. Furthermore, it is a level site with no significant construction issues, which will enable the District to build the station for less than other sites. This will also make the construction of a helipad possible creating a safe area to land helicopters as we currently have no dedicated heli-pad for airlift patients.

Monies received through fire department levied property taxes this year will equate to around \$217,000. This money is barely enough to sustain current operations and required programs. And since Snoqualmie Pass is surrounded by Forest Service land (and because we can not levy a tax against the U.S. Forest Service) we are severely prohibited from expanding our tax base and must rely upon outside assistance for continued operation. And unlike almost all of the other fire departments in the State of Washington, most of our customers, up to 80%, are non-taxing paying residents. Rather, they are people that are driving through the area, visiting the Ski Area, or visiting U.S. Forest Service Land.

I know that while Federal land isn't often given to local agencies, there is precedence as long as it's a relatively small acreage as well as being used for a public purpose and not leading to private profit.

Once the property is acquired we will need to fund the project to build the new Fire Station. Funding for the entire project is not expected to come from any one source. The Snoqualmie Pass Land Conveyance Act would overcome the first hurdle that has seemed to plague this department for over ten years. Funding sources for building the actual fire station are being pursued with the help of State Representative Bill Hinkle, the Washington State Fire Fighter's Association, Washington State Fire Chiefs Association, the Washington State Legislature, the Governor's Office, Federal Sources, and Homeland Security Grants. None of these processes have been found to allow funding for the purpose of purchasing property alone.

Senate Bill 2601, introduced by Senator Cantwell would convey land, without cost to our Fire Department. I realize that this is not done very often, but I believe our unique circumstance more than justify this to be done and it would ease the burden of building a new fire station. A Companion bill, HR 1285, passed the House of Representatives by voice vote on July 23, 2007.