

Suh/Schneider Business Meeting: Opening Statement
Senator Lisa Murkowski
February 13, 2014

Good morning and thank you, Chairwoman Landrieu. This is the first time I have been able to say that here, and the first time our panel has had a woman Senator in charge. So I congratulate you, and beyond that, truly look forward to working with you to advance our mutual priorities. I would also like to thank Chairman Wyden one last time for all his work over the past year. He hasn't left the Committee – but he has left it in better shape than when he took the gavel.

Unfortunately, Chairwoman Landrieu, I am also sorry that we are forced to start off this new era on the wrong foot, with a markup that was called over my objections. Many of us continue to have very strong concerns and unanswered questions about the nominee to be Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Ms. Rhea Suh. I do not believe that she has answered our questions adequately, that we have a good enough understanding of her current role at Interior, or that she is the right candidate for this position. As a result, I am not willing to vote in favor of her nomination today.

With regard to scheduling, I am not entirely clear why we are in such a rush. Our Committee reported four other Interior nominees nearly a month ago. None has been confirmed or even considered. I doubt the Senate will move quickly to take up a more controversial nomination – unless, of course, we're finally about to see the real reason why the Senate's rules were changed on us in the first place.

I have also heard claims that my opposition to Ms. Suh's nomination is purely a parochial matter over a one-lane road corridor in remote Alaska. It is certainly true

that I am still incredulous about Secretary Jewell's heartless rejection of a life-saving road for the residents of King Cove, but that is hardly my only reason for wanting, at a minimum, to be thorough about the next Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. The current leadership at the Department of the Interior has been making decisions that negatively impact the West as a whole. King Cove is only but an example of the direction of this Department and this Secretary.

As I evaluate the record, in her appearances before our Committee, I believe Ms. Suh has been either unaware and unprepared OR evasive, even misleading in her responses to our measured questions. My staff has added up the number of times when Ms. Suh provided insufficient answers, both here at ENR and at EPW either "live" and in writing. By my count, she was unable to muster a substantive response some 57 separate times, yet my colleagues on the other side of the aisle believe this is a nominee whose promotion deserves swift passage through our committee.

I would also question Ms. Suh's tenure at Interior. I have tried, along with my colleagues on EPW, to understand exactly what she has worked on during her nearly five years as the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget. And I must say, aside from expanding the purchasing power of the Department, Ms. Suh has not been able to relate any work on any other priority policy decisions. I am simply not sure what she has achieved – or what she has learned in her current capacity – to merit a new and higher-ranking position.

Finally, between the lack of answers we have received, and the lack of policy experience we have observed, I am simply not convinced that Ms. Suh is the right person to turn the Fish and Wildlife Service around. It will come as no surprise

that many of us are deeply unhappy with the direction of that agency right now – or that we expect the person in charge of overseeing it to have a clear understanding of what must change.

I have compiled a list of questions that still have not received adequate answers. I will again submit those, some for a third time, to see if Ms. Suh can provide better responses. I further ask that this markup be delayed until I, and my colleagues, receive full answers to all of our outstanding questions.

Either Ms. Suh lacks the knowledge, diligence and persistence to hold the position for which she has been nominated or her responses to legitimate inquiries from Senators have been intentionally vague or worse. I firmly believe that a reasonably qualified nominee who has completed nearly 5 years of service within the Department of the Interior in a leadership position would either know the answers to the questions to which Ms. Suh has claimed ignorance or would make it a point to learn the answers to such questions. The other alternative is that Ms. Suh knows or could learn the answers but is choosing to give “stock” answers rather than respond in detail. Regardless, the result is the same, Ms. Suh’s nomination does not merit the consent of Senators.

Lastly, I will note that I am prepared to vote for Ms. Janice Schneider’s nomination to be the Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management. While my colleagues requested that Ms. Schneider return to the committee for a second hearing, I believe she came prepared to answer our questions and prepared to discuss credibly the issues important to us. She showed that she deserves to move forward, and I commend her for that.

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