

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska)
Opening Statement
Legislative Hearing on the Critical Minerals Policy Act
January 28, 2014

Good morning and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for scheduling this hearing. I'm very pleased that our Committee could come together to discuss the Critical Minerals Policy Act today. I appreciate your leadership on it as Chairman, but I particularly want to recognize my friend and colleague, Senator Udall, who had his own bill in the last session. Our folks got together and worked through some of the issues, and I think what we have built is a legislative proposal that is good, and sound, and rational, and exactly what should happen in a committee likes this.

At introduction we received the number S. 1600, which seems both serendipitous and a bit presumptuous in this Congress. But I'm an optimist. Because our bill addresses such a significant issue – the critical minerals supply chain – and already has 19 members on board, I believe we could very well send it to the President this year. That would be a great win for this country.

I appreciate particularly your recognition that if we don't have the processing capacity and ability, we are still left in a very vulnerable state. I think we recognize that while we don't have the lion's share of critical minerals in this country, we do have very good supplies. We certainly have very strong supplies in my home state, and an opportunity to gain access to them. We're looking at it very critically. The problem, though, is that we would then have to ship it to China to be processed. So, once again, they have the leverage that we are trying to get around here.

I mentioned that we have re-introduced this bill with the proposals that I have outlined in my legislation along with Senator Udall's. A little over two years ago, at a hearing similar to this one, I asserted that we have a real problem on our hands. Today, I would assert that problem has not diminished. Our mineral-related policies remain outdated. Our dependence on foreign minerals is reportedly deepening. Our agencies are not as coordinated and focused on this issue as they need to be. And when it comes to permitting delays for mines, our nation is tied for last – meaning worst – in the world.

All along the supply chain, our mineral-related capabilities have slipped. Unless we take meaningful action, and soon, our economy and security could be jeopardized. Our recent experience with helium shows just how dire a shortage of a critical material would be for many different industries. And we need to realize, unless we do more to ensure our own domestic supply, we may have no way to prevent a crisis the next time around.

Our colleagues in the House have presented ideas to fix this problem, and we should consider them fairly, just as we expect they will consider ours. The fact of the matter is that we have taken different approaches. In the Senate, we have focused on the entire supply chain – by establishing a process through which minerals can be designated as critical; by adding accountability to the permitting process; by returning agencies to the important work of geologic surveying; by seeking alternatives and encouraging recycling; and by promoting a workforce that can rise to the challenges that undoubtedly lie ahead.

I know many are focused on the big speech that will be delivered across the Capitol later tonight. And while I would love it if the President looked at us and said, “The State of our Union could be stronger ... if we improved our mineral policies,” I am not going to hold my breath. I somehow doubt that will make his final text. But it is the truth. These are issues that deserve our attention. Minerals are the building blocks of our economy – critical to our prosperity, our standard of living, and our competitiveness. We need a steady, affordable, and domestic supply of them – mined here, refined here, processed here, and made into products here.

Our bill is bipartisan, practical, and fiscally responsible. It takes a comprehensive approach to an increasingly complex set of challenges. I believe it is worthy of our Committee’s support. I hope we will reach that point very soon. But for today, I will again thank those who worked on it with me – and those who are here to testify about it.

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