



**Opening Statement
Nomination Hearing of Robert Wallace
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 5, 2019**

Good morning, everyone. The Committee will come to order, this is a rare Wednesday session of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Before we begin, I want to recognize and provide a brief tribute to two Park Service employees – Jeff Babcock and Charles Eric Benson – they tragically passed away in an airplane crash in Whitehorse, Canada just a week ago, last Monday. They were not on official business, they were ferrying a private aircraft from the Lower 48 up to Alaska, as so many Alaskans do. Both of these individuals had extensive time within the Park Service. Jeff, in addition to being with the Park Service for years had a distinguished career in the Military and with the Troopers in the state. Eric Benson was also in the Air Force and the Army. Truly, truly great individuals, longtime Alaskans, and just a reminder to us of the inherent risk that sometimes we experience in more rural places, but both individuals who served their country and the agency very well. We were very saddened in Alaska by this news, and our thoughts and prayers are with their families and loved ones.

So we're here this Wednesday morning to consider the nomination of Robert Wallace, Rob, to be Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks at the Department of the Interior. This is, for me, a critical position, this is a nomination that we have been waiting for anxiously, I might add, for some period of time. And Mr. Wallace, I want to thank you for your willingness to serve.

This is one of five Assistant Secretary positions at the Department. And the individual who holds it oversees two key agencies – the Fish and Wildlife Service as well as National Park Service – of course they have numerous, wide-ranging responsibilities. They together administer nearly 170 million acres of lands in the United States, including 129 million acres in Alaska alone.

So, just to put it into context, colleagues: roughly 75 percent of all of the acreage of National Parks and wildlife refuges in the country are in the state of Alaska. We have seven of the twelve National Parks that exceed one million acres and is home to the largest National Parks and refuges.

So just putting it in context for the rest of you, when I say that the Department of Interior is like our "landlord" – we really mean it, because Alaskans need the people that are in charge to recognize that their decisions have a significant impact on our lives and our livelihoods. We've

had some highs and some lows within the Department, where again, it was more of a landlord, “mother may I,” type of relationship instead of a partnership. We want to return to that partnership relationship, and I think we have seen continuing improved relations.

With so much land administered by the Department, Alaska has a wide range of issues that need to be addressed. So, I don’t think I need to tell you, Mr. Wallace, but you’re probably going to be spending a lot of time on Alaska related issues, it’s just the nature of it, we’re going to twist your arm there. But we’ve got some things that are on deck, most notably a life-saving road to connect King Cove and Cold Bay. We also need to stand up the oil and gas program that Congress authorized for the 1002 Area, which is supported by nearly 70 percent of Alaskans, including many Alaska Natives who actually live within the 1002 Area.

At the national level, we need to address the multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog at our land management agencies, particularly for the National Park Service and for our wildlife refuges. This is something that many of us have been talking about, how we move forward on that. We need to provide access for hunting and fishing and promote outdoor recreation. There’s also many other provisions from our recent lands package that will need to be implemented, for the benefit of those communities and the people who live there.

Those are just a few of the imperatives that we have in place and why this position is so important and needs to be filled, and Mr. Wallace you need to know that I’m very confident that you have what it’s going to take in order to proceed within this position. You bring decades of experience in public life, including your time at the National Park Service, as well as here in the Senate, you’re no stranger to folks around here including right here on this outstanding committee. Mr. Wallace understands the importance of public lands and the complex issues that affect them. So it’s no surprise that a wide range of stakeholders, ranging from Ducks Unlimited to the National Park Conservation Association, that are supporting the nomination.

The Interior Department has actually been without a Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife since 2011. That’s a long time to have a vacancy in a very key position, so I look forward to moving Mr. Wallace’s nomination quickly.

For those who have questions this morning, know that I’m going to stick around for as long as it takes. We’re going to have votes, a series of votes beginning at 11:00 am, which will kind of interrupt things, but my intention is to conclude this hearing rapidly this morning, and then to report Mr. Wallace’s nomination as soon as possible.

I’ll going to turn to my Ranking Member for his opening Comments. And then, I would invite Senator Enzi and Senator Barrasso, as the Senator’s from Mr. Wallace’s home state to provide further introduction.

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