



Opening Statement
Nomination of David Bernhardt to be Interior Secretary
Senator Lisa Murkowski
March 28, 2019

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order. We are considering this morning the nomination of Mr. David Bernhardt to be Secretary of the Interior.

Mr. Bernhardt, I welcome you back to the committee again, you've been here numerous times. Thank you for the visit that we had last week. I know that you've had a change to visit with many of the members, I know they appreciate that time with you, as I certainly did. And I also want to thank you for all you have done at the Department, for your willingness to serve in a new and higher capacity, and for enduring what has become an increasingly slog through nominations process, so thank you for that.

Senator Gardner will introduce Mr. Bernhardt here shortly, and then Mr. Bernhardt will give his opening statement – I'll swear you in. But I want to start off by explaining why I believe David Bernhardt is an excellent choice for this important position.

Part of it is background. As a Colorado native and an avid sportsman, Mr. Bernhardt understands how federal land management decisions affect local communities. He has seen how federal policies impact people's access to and use of public land. And he recognizes the need to balance conservation with opportunities for economic development.

Another part of it is experience, we need experience around here. Mr. Bernhardt has served as Solicitor, as Deputy Secretary, and now Acting Secretary of the Interior. He has proven his ability to lead the Department. He has built strong working relationships with those who are affected by its decisions. I believe there is no question that he is ready for this job and can handle everything that it entails.

These are crucial considerations, especially for those of us from western states. We all know the story around here, I talk about it a lot. Alaska has more federal land than any other, and the Department of the Interior controls most of those acres. Back home, we often refer to the Department as our "landlord" – not necessarily something we enjoy, but it has been part of our reality there – People in Alaska clearly recognize that the decisions that are made back here have direct impact on them, their families, and their livelihoods.

But, we've seen a change in that relationship with this administration. I think we've gone from that landlord-tenant, 'can I hang a picture over here' type of a relationship to one that is based more on a partnership, and I appreciate that a great deal.

We have seen good progress in Alaska with this administration in several different areas – whether it’s the NPR-A, whether it’s the 1002, whether it’s gaining access for a small community in remote Alaska – we’ve had a good partner there.

When I meet with Alaskans, the prevailing sentiment is that Interior is doing a good job, and that’s a sea change from where we were just a few years ago. I think it helps to have some Alaskans on your team, which I greatly appreciate, you’ve got Joe Balash, you have Tara Sweeney. But I think we also see the reflection of the work led by Secretary Zinke at the time when you were working with him as Deputy and basically “chief operating officer.”

Alaska is not alone in seeing the benefits. A lot of people in a lot of states are benefiting from better leadership at the Department. And that’s why Mr. Bernhardt’s nomination is supported by a wide range of stakeholder groups, ranging from the Alaska Federation of Natives to Ducks Unlimited and the Safari Club.

But, for all the progress we’ve made, we know that there is a lot of work ahead. We need to fully tap into our resource potential, we need to strengthen our mineral security, something I talk about here a lot on the committee. We need to address the multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog at our land management agencies, particularly the National Park Service, that’s a concern that many of us have. We need forest management reforms to address the growing threat of wildfire. We need to lift decades-old Public Land Orders. And we need to do more to address climate change. And we’ve got to account for the territories, which also have a variety of different needs. And that’s only a partial list

That’s only a partial list, here. So we’ll have an opportunity this morning to engage you in further questions. For members who have questions here this morning, I will be here as long as anybody else wants to be. Committee members will then have their standard opportunity to submit questions for the record, I would ask that these questions be returned today by the close of business.

Mr. Bernhardt, I want to wrap up by thanking you for your willingness to continue to serve and take on even more responsibility at the Department. I also appreciate the work you did, with our committee and internally in the administration, to help so many members advance their priorities into law in our recently passed lands package. That was significant legislation for many of us on a host of levels, and you really helped to facilitate that, so thank you so much for that. This is your third nomination so you know the drill here, you know also that the nomination process has become unfortunately more difficult and contentious, even for good and well-qualified individuals. But know that my intention is to move quickly to confirm you to this new role as soon as we possibly can.

With that, Senator Manchin, I’ll now turn to you for your opening remarks.

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