



Opening Statement
Hearing on the Department of the Interior's FY 2019 Budget Request
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
March 13, 2018

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

We're here today to consider the President's budget request for the Department of the Interior for Fiscal Year 2019. This is the first of three budget hearings we intend to hold this year, so we look forward to hearing from both the Department of Energy and the U.S. Forest Service in the weeks ahead.

Secretary Zinke, welcome back to the committee, I appreciate you being here this morning with your team. You and I have worked closely to chart a path to greater energy security, which as you have noted, runs right through Alaska; so I'd like to thank you for all that you've done to help Alaska and the nation this past year. You made one of your first trips as Secretary up North. And I also thank you for just recently sending Deputy Secretary Bernhardt and Assistant Secretary Balash to the state last week – they were there to engage local communities and stakeholders as Interior lays out its framework for responsible exploration and development in the 1002 Area, so thank you for sending them up.

The President's budget request aims to build on the momentum created over the past year. The Department has requested a total of \$11.7 billion in discretionary appropriations for Fiscal Year 2019. Overall, that is a reduction of more than \$1 billion from the current level, but in line with the administration's efforts to shift more funding to defense needs.

While I do not agree with everything in this request, I think it's fair to say it is a lot better than what we have seen in many recent years, and I thank you for that. It focuses on taking care of the lands the federal government already owns, rather than continuing to buy more. And it will help us increase responsible production of our abundant natural resources, a goal that we both share

One highlight in that effort is the Department's new five-year plan for offshore leasing, which put almost all areas on the table, at least at the start—and I always emphasize that was a starting point. Like a lot of members of this committee, I support a new plan that provides greater access, while protecting the areas where development may perhaps not be right at this time.

This request also reinforces our efforts to improve our nation's mineral security. Both the President and you, Secretary Zinke, have recognized this as a critical issue. We need to continue to address our mineral security this year, through both continued administrative actions and complementary legislation. Within this request, I support the funding proposed for modern geologic mapping, which will contribute greatly to this effort.

During your confirmation hearing, Mr. Secretary, you made a commitment to work on the backlog of deferred maintenance in national parks. This request reflects that commitment with a legislative proposal to create a new public lands infrastructure fund, which was recently introduced by Senator Alexander. Of course, we are still examining the proposals and the details of that bill, Senator Portman has long been a lead on many of our parks issues, and also has a bill which we anticipate that we will be looking at in the weeks ahead. But, Mr. Secretary, I do appreciate your effort in reducing that backlog, and working with not only the members of this committee, Senators Portman and Alexander, but others on this.

One thing that we can all agree on is that the federal government needs to be a good neighbor to those with federal lands in their states. On that front, the administration's proposal to extend and increase the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program I think is a good sign.

With regard to our territories, I was pleased that we were able to authorize the 2010 Agreement to continue financial assistance to Palau as part of last year's defense authorization bill. I'd like to fully fund that Agreement in the near future and finally meet our obligations to our allies in Palau.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to note some interesting data that the Partnership for Public Service recently sent our way. According to their survey, the Department of the Interior improved on all ten workplace categories in 2017, from "effective leadership" and "empowerment" and "fairness" to "strategic management" and "support for diversity." I think we know that the Department has not always fared well in these types of surveys, but last year showed bona fide improvements, so I appreciate your continued work to improve its culture and performance, I think we're seeing that prove out.

So again, Mr. Secretary Zinke, I thank you again for being here this morning, and I thank you for your leadership. We will all have a time for questions after your statement, but thank you for appearing before the committee.

I'll now turn to Senator Cantwell for her opening remarks.

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