

Opening Statement
Nomination of Ryan Zinke to be the Secretary of the Interior
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
January 17, 2017

Good morning, everyone. I want to cordially welcome our new members of the committee. And I want to welcome all of you back as we begin our first hearing of the new year—at the start of a new Congress, a new administration, and what I hope will be a new era for the Department of the Interior.

Congressman Zinke, thank you for being here. Yours has been a life of service to our country, from your more than two decades as a Navy SEAL to your time as a member of the House of Representatives. Most recently, you have answered a new call, to continue your public work as a Cabinet Secretary for our next President.

Although we have only come to know one another since the President-elect announced his intention to nominate you, I have enjoyed our conversations. I'm excited to continue them in a more formal setting today. And as you learn more about each of the states touched by this Department, I particularly appreciate your efforts to understand how and why Alaska is unique among them.

To state that Alaska has had a difficult or tenuous relationship with the outgoing administration is probably more than an understatement. Instead of seeing us as the State of Alaska, our current President and Secretary seem to see us as “Alaska, the National Park and Wildlife Refuge”—a broad expanse of wilderness, with little else of interest or value.

We've lost access to lands and waters that even President Carter promised would be open to us. We've had our long-standing right to manage wildlife within our

borders ripped away. We've seen projects halted through the delay or denial of vital permits. For eight years, this administration has somehow chosen to believe that Alaska must be protected from Alaskans, and acted accordingly.

The restrictions we face in resource development are, at this point, unbelievable. Through the Interior Department, the Obama administration has attempted to ban energy development in nearly all of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. It has withdrawn tens of thousands of square miles of water outside of those two areas. It has attempted to convert the non-wilderness 1002 area in our Coastal Plain in ANWR, set aside by Congress for its energy potential, into de facto wilderness. It has canceled lease sales, closed half of our national petroleum reserve, and imposed costly, extralegal mitigation requirements.

It goes on and on and on. The Obama administration has repeatedly violated or sought to evade our "no more" clause. It has rewritten management plans to cut off economic activities and other reasonable uses of public lands. It has deprived us of opportunity, but offered nothing in return, not even to Alaska Native villages that are falling into the ocean because of changes in climate.

This reaches all the way to King Cove, where our current Secretary rejected a short, one-lane, gravel, non-commercial road needed to protect the health and safety of nearly 1,000 Alaskans. Without that road, there have been 55 medevacs over the past three years alone—including, recently, an elderly Aleut woman with a hip fracture who was forced to wait 40 hours for help to arrive.

And while Alaska may be the poster child, the reality is that our state is not alone in having suffered at the hands of the Interior Department since 2009.

With little regard for local concern and opposition, President Obama has designated more land and water as National Monuments than the previous 18 presidents combined. “Landscape level planning” – a term that sounds reasonable – is another example of a strategy that has been used to reduce the influence of local ideas, so that someone sitting here in Washington, DC can tell someone living in Fortymile, Alaska, or Blanding, Utah, what their life is going to look like.

Of course, Congressman Zinke, you are not responsible for this. But I am counting on you – as are many Alaskans, and many Americans – to come in and help fix it. I know that you are a Navy man, so forgive the expression, but we hope the cavalry is on the way. And I have a list of what can be done to improve the situation.

We need an Interior Department that fully understands the commitments made to Alaska—and that abides by them, particularly our “no more” clauses.

We need the Department to recognize what individuals such as John Sturgeon go through, when agencies like the Park Service overreach into our lives.

We need the Department to restore public access to public lands, to allow us to produce our resources, and to help us restore throughput in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System.

We need a Department that will lift decades-old Public Land Orders that no longer serve any purpose, other than to allow the federal government to control more of Alaska, and that will prioritize the cleanup of contaminated lands and legacy wells.

In Alaska, which has 223 million federal acres but just one-quarter of one percent of its land in private ownership, Interior *must* recognize the importance of land transfers and land exchanges.

We have promises that were made to our state at statehood that remain unfulfilled. Promises made pursuant to ANCSA, promises made to our native veterans. So know that ensuring that our federal government honors those commitments to Alaskans remains one of my highest priorities.

We also need a Department that will rely on the expertise of the State, and do more to address our needs, from volcanic monitoring to mineral mapping, in its budget.

That's a lot, all on its own. But if you are confirmed, Congressman Zinke, you will also inherit an array of problems and challenges that are broader in scope.

The Park Service reports it has an \$11.3 billion maintenance backlog—meaning that even while some remain intent on acquiring more federal land, we are not taking proper care of what we already have.

The U.S.-affiliated islands – territories like the Northern Marianas, and Freely Associated States like Palau – have issues ranging from worker visas to Compact Agreements that cannot be forgotten, either.

And then there's the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Whether we are discussing tribal courts, education, infrastructure, or development, we must work together to improve and empower our Native communities. That begins with meaningful

consultation with tribes—a legal requirement that the outgoing administration has often failed to meet.

Finally, Congressman Zinke, if you are confirmed, I expect we will work together in a manner that is thoughtful and reflective of a true partnership. And I hope that you will be able to show that the Interior Department is still capable of working with, rather than against, local stakeholders to achieve good results.

In our conversations, you have shared a vision of how the Department will look under your direction. We both know that will take hard work and close cooperation with this committee to fulfill your vision. But that work is well worth it, for all of us who care about our public lands – who want to see them managed well, and who want the public to have access to them, whether for rock climbing or gold mining or energy development.

Again, I thank you for being here, and for your willingness to serve.

Ranking Member Cantwell, I'll now turn to you for your opening remarks.

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