

Chairman Lisa A. Murkowski Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Hearing to Review the FY2019 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of the Interior

May 10, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

Good morning everyone. The hearing will come to order.

Today, we will review the fiscal year 2019 budget request for the Department of the Interior. I'd like to welcome our witnesses this morning: Secretary Zinke, who is accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget, Finance, Performance & Acquisition, Olivia Ferriter, and the Director of the Office of Budget, Denise Flanagan.

Secretary Zinke, welcome back to the Committee. The Energy and Natural Resources Committee held its budget hearing back in March, and I appreciate the opportunity to further discuss the details of your budget today. Over the past year we have been able to work closely together on a host of issues that are crucial to Alaska. Thank you for your commitment and attention to these important matters and all that you have already done to promote the responsible development of our state's abundant natural resources.

As a reminder to my colleagues, we'll adhere to the "early bird rule" for recognizing members for questions. I will call on members in the order they arrive, going back and forth between the majority and the minority. We'll do six-minute rounds of questions. It's my hope that we'll be able to do 2 to 3 rounds of questions in an effort to give everyone an opportunity to address the issues they wish to raise.

The FY 2019 budget request for the Department of the Interior is \$10.5 billion for programs within the jurisdiction of the Interior subcommittee. This is roughly \$2.5 billion below the enacted level, a reduction of 19%. As with every President's budget request, there are portions of the budget that I support and others that raise concern.

I appreciate the budget's emphasis on greater energy security and increasing responsible development of our natural resources. An important effort is the Department's work on a new five-year plan for offshore leasing. I'm pleased that the Draft Proposed Plan includes the Arctic OCS, which holds enormous potential in both the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. I know members from other states have differing views on including some new areas in the Plan, and that stakeholders and the public have offered extensive comments. I support a Plan that balances greater access, while maintaining protections in areas where development may not be appropriate at this time.

I'm also pleased with the budget's emphasis on our nation's mineral security. This is an issue that I've worked on for many years. I appreciate both you and the President recognizing the importance of reducing our nation's dependence on foreign sources for critical minerals that are essential to our economic security.

There are some reductions in the budget that I cannot support. For example, the state of Alaska and Alaska Natives are still waiting for the Department to convey title to millions of acres of their lands more than 50 years since Statehood. So it's hard for me to accept a 38% reduction to the Department's

program that issues conveyances to those who have already waited too long to receive title to their lands.

Alaska also has one-half of all federally recognized tribes. The Bureau of Indian Affairs provides essential programs for Alaska Natives that are fundamental to the federal government's legal obligations to our First Peoples. I'm concerned by many of the proposed reductions to the BIA - particularly the elimination of the Tribal Courts program and the Small and Needy tribes program, which provide critical resources to some of the poorest and most remote villages in Alaska.

Mr. Secretary, in your testimony you highlight the importance of addressing the deferred maintenance problem across the Department. The budget request proposes to establish a new public lands infrastructure fund to address the multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog at our nation's parks, refuges, and Bureau of Indian Education schools.

Similar proposals have been introduced by members of the Senate, including Senator Alexander who is on this subcommittee, and I look forward to working with you and my colleagues on this issue in my role as both Chairman of this subcommittee and the Energy and Natural Resources committee.

We made significant investments in deferred maintenance across the Department in the FY 2018 omnibus appropriations bill. The National Park Service Construction account received a \$150 million increase – the largest annual percentage increase ever for this appropriation – and funds were provided to the other land management agencies as well.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs was provided an additional \$162 million – including \$105 million for education construction, \$24 million to re-start the facilities replacement and construction program to improve public safety in Indian Country, and \$31 million to replace badly outdated dams and irrigation systems.

I know the omnibus was passed just over a month ago and the Department is still working on the spending plans for the individual bureaus to submit to the Committee. We hope to see those details soon. The fiscal year is passing quickly and it's important to get these resources on the ground.

With a budget agreement in place from the outset of the appropriations process, I'm optimistic that we can move bills quickly and in regular order. We cannot expect the Department of the Interior, or any of the other agencies funded by this bill, to function efficiently when we don't pass final appropriations bills until roughly half the fiscal year has passed. Sadly, this was the case in both FY 2017 2018. We need to do better this year. I look forward to working with my colleagues to address their priorities for this year's Interior bill. Mr. Secretary, I also look forward to working with you and your staff to identify your highest priorities so that we can ensure that you have the resources you need to fulfill your goals for the Department.

Thanks to all the witnesses for being here this morning. Now I will turn to my colleague and Ranking Member from New Mexico, Mr. Udall.

###