

**Chairman Richard Shelby Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and
Related Agencies**

**Hearing to Review the Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request
for the U.S. Department of Commerce**

June 8, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

Good morning and welcome to the first budget hearing of the Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations Subcommittee for Fiscal Year 2018.

This morning we will hear from Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross regarding the President's request for the Department's programs and activities in 2018.

Secretary Ross, I want to thank you for coming before this Subcommittee to discuss the priorities of the new administration.

Federal agencies across government have been tasked with significantly cutting down on spending. Creating a budget is not easy, but it is the first step toward achieving fiscal responsibility.

The Department of Commerce is charged with addressing several critical functions for our nation, which include: operating weather satellites and forecasting severe storms; enforcing trade laws to ensure American businesses can compete on a level playing field; working with distressed communities to spur economic development; and properly managing our nation's fisheries.

The President's fiscal year 2018 request is \$7.8 billion, which is \$1.4 billion below the 2017 enacted level, representing a 15 percent cut in the Department's budget.

The President's request focuses on generally increasing efficiencies through a tighter budget.

The request recognizes NOAA's need to recapitalize its aging fleet of operational vessels, which is essential for NOAA to continue its core missions in mapping, charting, and fishery data collection, among others.

While I am pleased to see the Department recognize the importance of these activities and the administration's prioritization of national security, I am troubled by some of the proposed cuts to other core programs.

The Department has requested a 45 percent reduction to NOAA's Polar Follow-on (PFO) satellite program. PFO is intended to provide the next generation of polar orbiting weather satellites, which currently contribute more than 80 percent of the data needed for numerical weather prediction models to forecast hurricanes and severe storms.

These weather satellites help save lives and protect property.

Secretary Ross, I am interested in hearing the Department's long-term strategy behind the requested decrease. What does the administration consider to be an acceptable risk posture for the future of polar weather satellites?

I am also concerned about the Department's budget decreases for programs that would advance weather forecasting capabilities.

For example, proposed cuts to the National Water Model could significantly impact our nation's ability to predict and respond to severe floods.

These cuts would slow operations at NOAA's National Water Center, which provides invaluable forecasts and services to the nation for water-related hazards.

The Department also proposes to eliminate important external competitive grant programs that partner with States and local communities across the nation, and which use matching funds to maximize any federal investment.

For example, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) provides small but valuable investments for economically distressed areas to spur development and support job creation.

Many rural communities across my state of Alabama have benefited from EDA's assistance grants.

Importantly, EDA grants—like those at NOAA and NIST—allow states and localities to steer priorities through a bottom-up approach instead of federal bureaucrats driving each decision.

I fear the Department's request to eliminate external partnerships will further consolidate power within Washington rather than maintain flexibility and decision-making within local communities.

Another way the Department significantly impacts local communities is by overseeing the management of our nation's fisheries.

I was deeply disappointed in NOAA's decision to shorten the recreational fishing season for red snapper to just three days in the Gulf of Mexico.

Because this Subcommittee has provided unprecedented resources and strict direction for NOAA to improve its management of reef fish in the Gulf, I find NOAA's determination unacceptable.

In 2017, the Subcommittee made permanent the extension of state boundaries in the Gulf for managing red snapper and provided \$10 million to conduct an independent stock assessment, which will be compared to NOAA's internal process.

Secretary Ross, it is my hope that the Department will work to alleviate the hardship placed on recreational anglers and businesses—such as tackle shops, boat manufacturers, and ice houses—that rely on greater access to this abundant resource in the Gulf.

Finally, I have questions about the Department's accountability and oversight of the upcoming 2020 Census.

Not only did the Government Accountability Office add the 2020 Census to its high-risk list, but a critical computer system was recently discovered to have surpassed its budget by \$309 million.

As the 2020 Census approaches, such news does not instill confidence in the Department's preparation for this constitutional requirement.

Mr. Secretary, I look forward to hearing your views on these and other matters during today's hearing.

I now turn to our Ranking Member, Senator Shaheen, for her opening statement.

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