

**Chairman Lisa Murkowski Opening Statement  
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,  
and Related Agencies**

**Review of the FY2018 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of the Interior**

**June 21, 2017**

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Good morning everyone. The hearing will come to order.

Today, we will review the fiscal year 2018 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. I chaired a budget hearing yesterday in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee with the Secretary so I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the details of the budget request with you further this morning, Mr. Secretary.

As a reminder, 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.

Turning to the budget request for the Department of the Interior – it is \$10.6 billion for programs within the jurisdiction of the Interior subcommittee. This is \$1.6 billion below the enacted level, or a reduction of 13%. As with every President's budget request, there are portions of the budget that I support and other areas that raise concern.

Last year at the Department's budget hearing, I pointed out to the previous Secretary that the President's request included numerous budget "gimmicks" to provide additional spending for popular programs like the centennial celebration for the National Park Service without any offsets. By contrast, your budget doesn't use gimmicks – it proposes real cuts to programs. This is a refreshing change, and I welcome the opportunity to carefully examine all the programs that receive appropriations in the Interior bill to determine whether the choices your budget makes are worthwhile. We should consider whether reforms could help improve efficiency, whether some activities may be better performed by the states, and whether there are duplicative programs that can be streamlined.

However, I am not in favor of the wholesale elimination of, or drastic reductions to programs simply to "hit a budget number." I've told many of your predecessors that the Secretary of the Interior is often called "Alaska's Landlord." This is not an overstatement - the Department has over 220 million acres in Alaska under its jurisdiction and that doesn't include the millions of acres of Outer Continental Shelf waters. The unique position of the Secretary in Alaska requires that you have the resources available to meet your Department's responsibilities.

That's why some of these proposed reductions are troubling. 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 34% reduction to the Department's program that issues conveyances to those who have waited so 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 troubled by many of the proposed reductions to the BIA - particularly the elimination of the Tribal Courts program for which I secured funds for the first time in fiscal year 2016. This program is providing critical resources to tribal courts in some of the most remote villages in our state – confronting widespread domestic violence, sexual assault, and substance abuse.

Finally, I know my western colleagues share my concern with the proposed reduction for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program of \$68 million, or 15%. PILT is absolutely essential for our rural areas to support roads, schools and police.

While there are many program reductions that trouble me, I am pleased that your request made hard choices and provided some programs will strong funding levels. The budget provides full funding for Contract Support Costs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs by maintaining the indefinite appropriation language that I first included in the fiscal year 2016 appropriations bill. This has helped provide certainty for tribes and protected other BIA programs in case additional funds are needed to meet the government's legal obligations.

I'm also pleased that the request includes full funding for the 10-year average for wildland firefighting - something the previous Administration did not do. While the budget does not include any type of "fix" for fire borrowing, it acknowledges the problem and expresses the Administration's willingness to work with Congress on a solution. As I told the Chief of the Forest Service two weeks ago, this is an issue that we must work on together. The change of Administration offers a unique opportunity with new leadership to finally resolve the problem of fire borrowing in a fiscally responsible way.

There are a number of policy proposals in the budget that I strongly support such as opening of the "1002 area" of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for energy development. In Alaska today, the Department of the Interior will hold an offshore lease sale in Cook Inlet. This is good news, but it reminds me that the last Administration excluded some of the most promising areas in Alaska's Arctic OCS from its 5-year leasing plan. The Department's budget request commits resources to re-writing this plan so that important areas in Alaska and elsewhere in the Lower 48 will receive proper consideration.

Mr. Secretary, you have been on the job for only a short time, but I deeply appreciate that you have already traveled to Alaska to learn more about our state. You have made several policy decisions that will help improve our economy and the lives of all Alaskans. There is genuine optimism that your leadership can make a real difference as we face a challenging economy.

This year's budget will require the Subcommittee to make tough choices. I am optimistic that we will be able to address many of the highest priority needs of members of this Subcommittee – including some of those that were not included in the President's request. Mr. Secretary, I 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.

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