

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

**Hearing to review to Review the FY2017 Budget Request & Budget Justification
for the U.S. Department of the Interior**

March 2, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

I'd like to welcome everyone to the first hearing of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee for FY 2017. We're here to review the budget request for the Department of the Interior. I'd like to welcome our witnesses this morning: Secretary Jewell, who is accompanied by Deputy Secretary Mike Connor and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Kris Sarri.

Since this is our first hearing of the year, I want to remind everyone that I'm going to follow past practice and 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 will do six-minute rounds of questions. My expectation is that we will do 2-3 rounds of questions depending on votes and schedules of the members and the witnesses. I will try to accommodate everyone so that they have a fair opportunity to address the issues they wish to raise.

I also want to welcome my Ranking Member - Senator Udall - this morning. We managed to markup this bill for the first time in six years in FY 2016. While we didn't agree on everything in the bill - we were never disagreeable. I appreciate my friend from New Mexico's good nature and his passion for the issues that are the heart of this subcommittee's work. I look forward to another productive year here on the subcommittee working with both Senator Udall, and all the members of the subcommittee.

Turning to the budget request for the Department of the Interior – it is \$12.25 billion for programs within this subcommittee's jurisdiction. This includes \$290 million for a proposal similar to last year which allows certain firefighting costs to be appropriated as "disaster" funds. This total is 2% above the enacted level. However, I should note for my colleagues that the Department's request does not include funds for PILT as part of the discretionary budget. Funding for PILT was provided within our bill last year at the fully authorized level of \$452 million. Accordingly, an "apples to apples comparison" to FY 2016 is that the President's request is roughly 5.8% above current levels.

Secretary Jewell, as I noted when you appeared before the Energy Committee last week, there are a number of aspects of the President's budget proposal I find troubling. It includes a number of mandatory spending proposals without providing any offsets. For example, the request proposes \$425 million of mandatory spending for LWCF without an offset. Similarly, for the National Park Service, the budget proposes mandatory spending of \$1.5 billion over a 3 year window – again with no offsets.

The Administration has engaged in this questionable practice of proposing mandatory funding for popular programs with no offsets during the last several budget cycles. This approach raises expectations that funding will materialize when we all know that finding “payfors” even for the most popular programs is extremely difficult in this budget environment. And, when the authorizing committees are unable to find offsets in their jurisdiction to pay for these proposals, it places more pressure on this committee to find funds out of our limited resources.

It also prioritizes certain programs within this subcommittee’s jurisdiction over others and places them on “auto-pilot” at the expense of other dire needs. Such as those in Indian Country where schools are failing, suicide rates are so far above the national average its heartbreaking; and the health care system is strained to its limits - often providing services in facilities that are over 100 years old. In my view, funding increases as proposed for LWCF and the National Park Service should be evaluated and prioritized each year among all the programs over which this subcommittee has oversight—and this budget does not appear to have done that.

Don’t get me wrong - I will work with the Administration and my colleagues on a responsible, bipartisan National Park Service Centennial bill, but the \$1.5 billion proposal put forward here is simply unrealistic. I hope we can be creative in the use of public/private partnerships and other means to stretch our federal funding farther and reach consensus on a bill that appropriately celebrates the 100th anniversary of our National Parks.

I’m also concerned that, yet again, when oil prices have fallen dramatically and many companies are on the verge of bankruptcy, the Department indicates in its budget request that it will propose a host of new fees and royalty rate increases on energy producers that will exceed \$1.7 billion. There are also new fees on grazing and hard rock mining. I don’t see how making it more expensive to do business on public lands is sound policy or good for the United States Treasury.

I am pleased that this budget fully funds Contract Support Costs and adopts the approach I put forward in the Senate mark for FY 2016 which establishes a separate, indefinite appropriation for these costs to ensure these legal obligations are met and other programs will not be affected. We’ve come a long way from two years ago when the Administration proposed circumventing the tribes’ victory in the Ramah decision and sought to cap these costs. I thank my colleagues in the House and Senate for their support in this effort.

Finally, there is King Cove, which is still totally unresolved. I know we discussed this issue at length last week during your testimony before the Energy Committee. Again, we see nothing in this budget request to help those whose lives are in needless danger. Secretary Jewell, you did agree to publicly release the non-road, non-solutions study that Interior commissioned for King Cove during the ENR budget hearing. When we get to time for questions, I do plan to ask you about when this report will be released.

I have talked to virtually all of my colleagues about the need for a life-saving road to King Cove. I mention it again here, particularly for the information of members who are not on the Energy Committee, so that they are aware that I remain committed to do everything in my power as the Chairman of that Committee and as Chairman of the Interior subcommittee to fight for construction of this critical road.

Thank you to all the witnesses for appearing before the subcommittee this morning. I now turn to Ranking Member Udall for any comments that he would like to make.

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