

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing on Oversight of the U.S. Geological Survey April 7, 2016

“Thank you, Madam Chairman, for scheduling this important hearing. And like Alaska, Washington has a lot of related issues. And so this is a hearing of great importance to our state, as well.

“I’d like to extend a warm welcome to the witnesses today – thank you for being here. I also want to say hello to Dr. John Vidale, who is here from Washington state. He is the Washington state seismologist, director of the Pacific Northwest Seismic Network and professor at the University of Washington. These are people we count on all the time, so we appreciate them being here.

“It’s a great opportunity this morning to talk about the important work of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), which is the nation’s premier earth science agency, one of the most respected science organizations in the world and so important to us.

“The USGS:

- Produces our nation’s maps;
- Monitors our rivers;
- Guides our energy and mineral development;
- Supports the management of our public lands; and
- Helps us respond to natural hazards such as floods, earthquakes, volcanoes and landslides.

“As the primary science agency for the Department of the Interior, the USGS plays an incredible role in informing decision-making across the department and its many bureaus. They also provide technical assistance to states, tribes and communities across the country.

“These partnerships are particularly important in informing our decisions at the local level. In many states, the USGS is a critical partner; it is in our state.

“I’d like to take a few moments to highlight what that partnership means.



“The first area I’d like to highlight is partnerships to protect public safety from natural hazards. The USGS is the federal agency responsible for monitoring these natural hazards such as volcanoes, earthquakes and landslides.

“Washington—like Alaska—has its share of these hazards. We are so glad that they are an absolutely critical partner in monitoring and responding to these hazards.

“As many people know, Mount St. Helens erupted in 1980 and was the largest volcanic eruption in U.S. history. In fact, the state of Washington has six high risk volcanoes, including Mount Rainier, which is considered one of the nation’s most dangerous volcanoes.

“Since the 1990s, the USGS has partnered with Pierce County to operate a lahar warning system to protect the lives and property should an eruption occur. There are probably 80,000 people in the path of that potential eruption and lahar. Not that the eruption at Mount St. Helen’s wasn’t significant, but the population density around Mount Rainier is another story.

“However, new monitoring, science and warning systems are needed throughout the West. That is why Chairman Murkowski and I are co-sponsoring the National Volcano Early Warning and Monitoring System Act (S. 2056)—to protect communities that are in these high-risk areas.

“Another significant hazard in the state of Washington is earthquakes, just like the chair said. Dr. Vidale here is our state seismologist who has been working with the USGS and other states along the West Coast to develop an Earthquake Early Warning System.

“USGS studies show that a major earthquake could occur in the next 50 years. It has been estimated that this earthquake could approach the intensity of the quake and tsunami that struck Japan in 2011, potentially affecting major cities like Seattle. In fact, we are having the largest scale tsunami drill two months from now in the Northwest. It is going to be thousands of people participating in how to respond to that.

“That is why we continue to advocate for the Earthquake Early Warning System—because it would save lives and billions of dollars.

“And, that is also why we introduced the Tsunami Warning, Education and Research Act (S. 533) last year. This bill passed the Senate last year and would require the USGS to work with the NOAA Tsunami Program.



“Madam Chair – just because I know you care so much about this – our work on the Commerce Committee – there is so much that needs to be done with mapping and then working with the local community that needs to be knitted together. People need to see the maps, what could potentially happen, then the community has to link together a response. And all the agencies responsible for that need to work together.

“Finally, I want to mention the terrible tragedy of the Oso Landslide that occurred in March of 2014, which caused 43 deaths. That mudslide was so devastating and we still feel the loss of life. And we thank so many of our first responders who responded to that. The USGS provided critical assistance in the search and rescue operation, including real-time monitoring to keep our first responders safe. A horrible tragedy and yet, we couldn’t even – without USGS – send the first responders into the area about the information and data about whether it was safe to go into the area. We were counting on them.

“Landslides cause over two dozen fatalities and \$1 to 2 billion dollars a year in damages across the country. This is a significant issue. Better understanding these hazards and their impacts and potential to helping save lives and protect property is important.

“I am pleased to hear that the USGS is proposing to increase some of its work in this area. We need a national landslide mitigation strategy, more science and more monitoring to prevent these terrible tragedies from occurring.

“Another area I just want to highlight – the USGS protects and restores watersheds. The state of Washington is home to some of the greatest rivers and estuaries. The Puget Sound and Columbia River are the economic and cultural lifeblood of the region. The USGS’s work there is very important.

“The USGS has faced a number of institutional challenges in carrying out its mission. With a budget of only \$1.06 billion, the organization leverages its resources many times over. However, many areas (such as hazard and water monitoring) are severely underfunded. This is where I think good science really can help us all move forward.

“Strategic investments are needed to advance new science and tools. And, a number of programs and business practices need to be modernized and streamlined. It is important that we have these programs.

“I know a lot of other committees are talking about drone and drone systems – these can provide some very critical tools and information. So we want to see that move forward, so these agencies can use these effectively.

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“So glad to have both panels here today. Thank you for being here.”

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