



Opening Statement
Full Committee Hearing to Examine Natural Hazards
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
January 30, 2018

Good morning, everyone. The Committee will come to order.

We are here for two purposes. Our first task is a business meeting to report four nominations and ratify subcommittee assignments for our new members, Senator Capito and Senator Smith.

So we're awaiting a quorum of 12 members to begin that meeting, What I intend to do is go ahead and begin our full committee hearing on natural hazards, and then if we are able to find a quorum this morning we will take a quick break, conduct that business, and then get back to you.

Our focus this morning is on volcanoes, earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, and avalanches –natural hazards that many Americans experience on a somewhat regular basis – and the measures being taken to minimize risks from those hazards.

We had an opportunity just yesterday, in speaking with the Mayor of Kodiak who is with us today, we had a very timely event j last week; we had a magnitude 7.9 earthquake that struck off the coast of Alaska, about 175 miles southeast of Kodiak, in the Gulf of Alaska.

It was just a little bit after midnight when the earthquake struck, about 12:30 am. A lot of folks were already in bed. That was the Monday I of the government shutdown. But thanks to the good work from the Alaska and National Earthquake Centers, and the National Tsunami Warning Center, a tsunami alert was issued and communities from Chignik to Cordova to Kodiak evacuated to higher ground.

It is reassuring to know that the Earthquake and Tsunami Centers, who provide critical information for life saving purposes, were not impacted by the shutdown. We worked real quick to make sure, is everybody up, is everybody doing what they're supposed to be doing even in the midst of a shutdown. So thank you for that.

We do understand the earthquake caused some damage, including in Kodiak—but the tsunami associated with it was quite small, and that means that basically we just lucky, and the people of not only Kodiak but of many of our coastal communities felt like they just got lucky.

As many Alaskans know, that isn't always the case. In 2015, 53 landslides that came down in Sitka, Alaska, including one that tragically claimed three lives.

Earlier this winter, Alaska lost a member of the skiing community to an avalanche in Hatcher's Pass, right in Anchorage's backyard.

I'm frequently reminded of the magnitude 9.2 earthquake that struck Alaska on Good Friday in 1964.

That is the largest earthquake to ever hit North America, and coupled with tsunamis, it claimed 131 lives and caused significant, widespread damage. We had an opportunity to look at some of the pictures from that massive earthquake and tsunami.

Of course, Alaska isn't the only state to face these hazards. Last month, mudslides in southern California claimed the lives of 21 people and caused millions of dollars of damage.

I know that Senator Cantwell will speak to the landslide that occurred in Oso a few years ago, we've had discussion about that horrible tragedy and the fact that it took 43 lives—but also an imminent disaster, if you will, one that is about to give way at Rattlesnake Ridge in Washington state that everyone is watching very, very closely.

The good news is that our federal, state, and local partners are developing the tools and maps needed to better understand these natural hazards, in an effort to give more advanced warning to communities in danger.

Those include seismic monitors for earthquakes, elevation mapping to mark out slopes vulnerable to landslides, cameras on volcanoes, sensors along rivers and coasts, and tidal monitors to help detect tsunamis.

Some operations are more advanced than others. The U.S. Geological Survey's National Earthquake Center is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and maintains hundreds of seismic monitors across the country.

But at the Bogoslof volcano on the Aleutian Chain, which erupted for about eight months last year, so eight months it just keeps going spewing, and we watch the activity but we effectively have to rely on satellite data to alert pilots to ash clouds because there is no monitor on the volcano.

I am one of several members who have introduced legislation to address those gaps. We've got two bills – the National Volcano Early Warning and Monitoring System Act and the National Landslide Preparedness Act – these are already included in our Energy and Natural Resources Act, which is awaiting consideration on the Senate floor.

This morning, we will learn about the need for better monitoring and mapping to provide as much warning of natural hazards as possible, and to reduce impacts to life and property.

Before I turn to Senator Cantwell for her opening remarks, I would like to acknowledge the President's intent to nominate James Reilly, a geologist and an astronaut, to be the Director of the U.S. Geological Survey. I look forward to receiving his paperwork and considering him before the Committee.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge Chairman Thune, of the Commerce Committee, he worked with us to ensure that tsunamis could be included as part of our hearing. NOAA, which falls under the Commerce Committee's jurisdiction, is the lead federal agency on tsunamis—but we are glad to be discussing that issue here this morning, particularly given last week's tsunami warning.

With that, I'll turn it over to Senator Cantwell.

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