



Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on Department of the Interior's FY 2016 Budget
Feb. 24, 2015

“Thank you Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this hearing.

“I’m pleased to see Secretary Jewell here and to be able to have conversations with Mr. Connor, as well, on the President’s proposed budget for the Department of the Interior.

“In my view, this budget represents a balanced and forward-leaning proposal.

- It creates jobs and long-term economic opportunity
- It builds strong partnerships with states, tribes, and local communities, when it comes to managing our infrastructure, ecosystems and resources;
- It invests in public lands, for the next generation of Americans to enjoy.

“It’s probably no surprise that the Chairwoman and I do have different views on a variety of issues that are being discussed here this morning. And many of those do relate to the Administration’s energy and conservation proposals in the Arctic.

“Secretary Jewell, I know you have a very tough job. One of the reasons that I think the President appointed you, is that you did have a background as an executive in the oil industry as an engineer. So it does involve striking an appropriate balance between increasing energy production both onshore and offshore in the United States, as well as being sensitive to environmental areas.

“I have long supported the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and especially in the coastal plain.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service recently released a Comprehensive Conservation Plan that takes an important step of recommending that significant portions of the refuge to be designated as wilderness.

“This conservation plan, which is required by law, had not been updated for a quarter century. I believe the new plan is more an accurate reflection of the values of which the wildlife refuge was designated.

“Similarly, there has been criticism in the new five-year leasing plan for the Outer Continental Shelf for excluding too many areas from potential development. And others have opposed the Secretary’s decision to open up areas that have been up until now, off-limits from oil and gas development, where the environmental damage would be extreme. So the Secretary has done her best to balance these competing interests.

“Likewise the Department’s recent decision to approve oil and gas development in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska was criticized on the one hand for approving development near an area that the NPR-A proposed for protection, and criticized on the other hand for requiring ConocoPhillips to incorporate mitigation measures because of those sensitive areas. So, yes you have a very tough day job.

“Protection of these ecological treasures such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is an issue of national importance. So I thank you and the administration for making these important decisions.

“As a whole, the President’s proposed \$13 billion investment represents a roughly six percent increase over current funding levels.

“It proposes significant funding increases for many of the import conservation programs, including the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the National Park Centennial Initiative, both very important.

“I know that there are many people on this Committee who believe that protecting these public lands, and increasing recreational opportunities are greatly important.

“America’s public lands generate over \$40 billion dollars in recreation use every year.

“Whether you’re visiting a national park, or hunting or fishing, the opportunities on these Federal lands are important.

“We can also enjoy the protection of our nation’s special places while still maintaining a high level of energy production on Federal lands.

“The President’s budget reflects a strong commitment to increasing energy development, and I’m especially pleased to see that the Department is also increasing the production of renewable energy resources on public lands.

“I want to bring up something that is missing in the budget.

“Secretary Jewell is taking an important step in proposing reforms on how coal royalties are collected on federal resources.

“But I am concerned that the discussion ends there. You can typically lease a ton of federal coal for \$1 or less. The taxpayers get a 1 dollar. Then years later we have to deal with almost 2 tons of carbon dioxide from that 1 ton of coal. And the government’s current best guess is that 2 tons of carbon pollution will cost the American public over \$70 in damages.

“Our fossil fuel leasing laws were passed long ago before we knew how bad these impacts were.

“I intend to follow up on this issue. I know my colleagues, Sen. Wyden and Murkowski, the GAO, the Interior Inspector General; many press articles have been raised about this issue. I plan to raise my own concerns about this as well.

“Similarly, I am concerned that we adequately consider the real impacts of climate change on our public lands.

“This is an issue that is important to places like Washington and Alaska, to many places in our country.

“The Tacoma News Tribune recently pointed out many of the related climate impacts at Mount Rainier National Park.

“In the past decades, about glaciers melting and snowpack decreased as much as 18 percent between 2003 and 2009, so these are real issues. Everything from mud slurrries to floods to repairing park infrastructure. We all know that historic drought conditions in California and in the west have demonstrated climate-related changes are present challenges to businesses, to the government, to families.

“Because of this, I’m pleased that the budget includes a 15 percent increase for climate-related research.

“I hope that this will help us bring better understanding of how to prepare for these issues.

“Similarly, the issue of wildfire impacts throughout the country.

“Last year, our State experienced one of our worst wildfires. The Carlton Complex—the destruction there represents 7 percent of all wildfire destruction last year. In just this one fire, 156,000 acres burned in 24 hours. That’s like 5 acres a second. Again the micro-climates and the changes are things that we are really starting to understand have grave impacts on all these things.

“My Western colleagues have in recent hearings brought up various stories, so I hope we can get to some of these issues.

“I also strongly support the President’s proposal to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and provide a permanent, mandatory funding stream beginning next year.

“This is something, as I’ve said many of our colleagues here on the Committee agree with, but every year Congress appropriates only a fraction of the authorized funding. Right now, the un-appropriated balance is almost \$20 billion.

“I hope that since this fund expires in September, and we had a pretty good vote on the Senate floor about this, that we will work together in a bipartisan fashion to address these issues.

“And when I get a chance to get to the Q&A, I’m definitely going to ask you about the Yakima River Basin Watershed and the area to protect it.

“After years of negotiations, users of irrigated water such as farmers and ranchers, along with Tribes and conservation groups planned to develop and utilize in a better fashion, the resources of the Yakima River watershed in a time of increased demand and growing scarcity.

“The reason I bring this up, is because I believe this effort will be successful. And I also believe that it is a model for how other watersheds in the West are experiencing these challenges. And that if we work together and we work with them, that we can have better resolution of these issues.

“I look forward to discussing these and many other issues when we get to the questions. Again, I appreciate your commitment—and the President’s—to creating jobs, building partnerships and investing in our public lands for future generations.”

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