



Opening Statement
ENR Oversight Hearing on the U.S. Geological Survey
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
April 7, 2016

Good morning and welcome, everyone. The hearing will come to order.

We are here to conduct oversight of the U.S. Geological Survey. It has been a long time since our committee conducted direct oversight of this agency outside of the nominations process, and there are a number of important and relevant issues for us to explore today.

I am among those who appreciate both the work of the USGS and the spirit in which it is typically undertaken. The agency is known for being non-partisan, and for seeking out concrete scientific evidence. And let me tell you, it's quite refreshing to have an agency come before our Committee that does not have a significant regulatory agenda moving full speed ahead.

It is also comforting to know that the Survey is collecting and monitoring data that is vital to the safety and wellbeing of the American people. Alaskans, in particular, are grateful for the work that USGS does to help us cope with the daily threat of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and other natural hazards. And people might say, "daily threat Lisa, relax a bit." But my week back home, I was grounded by a volcano because the airplanes could not fly. And it was only a few days after that we had a 6.2 earthquake. There was no damage, but a 6.2 earthquake gets your attention, not quite as much the 7.1 we had a couple of month prior to that, but we have a lot of stuff going on there. We appreciate the vigilance of the USGS.

I do recognize again that we have parts of our country that are active in different ways, and the real need for real-time volcano monitoring, the recognition that we have very tectonically active areas in Alaska. So knowing what you do at the agency there is very important.

Another success story can be found with the Alaska Mapping Executive Committee. The AMEC [A-M-E-C], composed of representatives from 15 federal and state agencies, was formed in 2012 to prioritize the collection of high-resolution elevation data. This initiative has since expanded to collect other map layers, providing vital data to ensure the safety of our pilots and those wanting to explore the Alaskan wilderness.

Director, you were up in Alaska last year when we were celebrating the fifty percent mark, where we had mapped over fifty percent of the state. In fairness, I think we were at fifty-seven percent but it says something when we have a celebration when we hit fifty percent and I noted that at the time. We have a ways to go, but we are half way there. And we appreciate that and look forward to working it further.

While I support many efforts and activities within the USGS, I also believe that some of its core areas lack attention and resources. And that is another reason why we are here today – to review the agency’s priorities.

Our mineral security is one of them. This will come as no surprise to anyone who has followed our committee, but I remain seriously concerned about our growing foreign mineral dependence.

Last year we imported more than 50 percent of our supply of 47 minerals, including 100 percent of 19 of them. Even though minerals are more important to our modern society than ever before, we are paying less and less attention to them. That shows in the USGS budget, where not even 10 percent goes to the energy and minerals program. And it shows elsewhere, too: after the USGS reports our foreign dependence, it is very difficult to find anyone, anywhere in the federal government, who is responsible for doing anything to meaningfully reduce it.

Going back to mapping, the USGS has used hyperspectral imagery to map more than 96 percent of Afghanistan. While hyperspectral imagery is used for mineral exploration, very little of the U.S. has been mapped with this technology. It is frustrating to hear that the USGS has conducted surveys on the other side of the world while there are assessments here in the U.S. that still need to be completed.

I recognize the importance of the Survey’s other mission areas, but those cannot come at the expense of the congressionally authorized and congressionally mandated responsibilities that USGS holds.

So, I’m glad that we are having this hearing today. We will highlight areas of success for the Survey, but also identify the gaps within the agency that prevent it from meeting its original and primary directives.

Again, Director Kimball I appreciate you being with us before the Committee today and for your leadership at USGS.

Let’s turn to Senator Cantwell for her opening remarks.

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