

JUL 21 2017

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Murkowski:

Enclosed you will find my responses to the written questions submitted following the July 20, 2017, hearing on my nomination to be Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget.

Please feel free to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

  
Susan Combs

Enclosure

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**July 20, 2017 Hearing: Pending Nominations**  
**Questions for the Record Submitted to Ms. Susan Combs**

**Questions from Ranking Member Maria Cantwell**

**Question 1:** Are you familiar with the problem we face each year ensuring that the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have adequate funds to fight fires on the public lands?

**Response:** Yes, I am familiar with this issue.

**Question 2:** If confirmed, will you commit to working with us to find a solution to the problem of “fire borrowing,” which has diverted funds needed to maintain and improve the health of our forests and make them more fire-resistant to pay to fight fires?

**Response:** Yes, you have my commitment to work with you and the Committee to address this serious issue.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**July 20, 2017 Hearing: Pending Nominations**  
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**Questions from Senator Bernard Sanders**

**Question 1:** President Trump has suggested in the past that climate change is a hoax. Is the President correct? Is climate change a hoax?

**Response:** I believe that the climate is changing and man has an influence.

**Question 2:** Do you agree with the vast majority of scientists that climate change is real, it is caused by human activity, and that we must aggressively transition away from fossil fuels toward energy efficiency and sustainable energy like wind, solar, and geothermal?

**Response:** I do believe that the climate is changing and that human activity has contributed to that. In terms of energy development, I believe in an all-of-the-above approach that includes both conventional oil and gas development and renewable energy sources to meet our nation's critical needs.

**Question 3:** Do you agree with the vast majority of scientists that the combustion of fossil fuels contributes to climate change?

**Response:** Yes.

**Question 4:** Do you believe that DOI has a role in reducing the extraction and use of fossil fuels?

**Response:** I am not aware that Congress has ever provided that direction to the Department of the Interior. I believe in the responsible development of our nation's natural resources as well as the renewable energy sources to fulfill the Secretary's goal of establishing American energy independence.

**Question 5:** If confirmed, how will you work to address climate change?

**Response:** Should I be confirmed for this position, I would work collaboratively with my colleagues in the Department to provide legally and scientifically sound policy advice to Secretary Zinke as it relates to the Department's mission and the influence of climate change to advance his priorities. My advice and decision-making as Assistant Secretary will be rooted in robust engagement with affected constituencies and this Committee. I commit to carrying out this work with efficiency, openness and transparency.

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**Question 6:** Which improvements to the management of federal public lands do you hope to achieve, if confirmed?

**Response:** Among my priorities as Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget, should I be confirmed, would be to enhance the Department's human capital, to maximize the public's access to public lands and resources, to address the deferred maintenance backlog on lands managed by the Department's bureaus, and to craft responsible budgets for the Department and its bureaus that are balanced in a way that increases operational efficiency among various programs and maximizes use of limited taxpayer dollars.

**Question 7:** The Department of the Interior is the most important federal government agency for dealing with the issues that affect Native American tribes. The Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs "assists and supports the Secretary of the Interior in fulfilling the United States' trust responsibility to the federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages and individual Indian trust beneficiaries, as well as in maintaining the Federal-Tribal government-to-government relationship." If confirmed, will you commit to an open door policy for tribal leaders to ensure that the federal government upholds its trust responsibility and maintains its government-to-government relationship with tribal leaders?

**Response:** Yes.

**Question 8:** DOI's eight regional Climate Science Centers (CSC) cover the continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands. Each CSC is based out of a host university in their region and most are comprised of multi-institution consortia, which include university and non-university partners. In 2016, the work of the centers included assessments of warming on river flow, working with tribes to assess management strategies, and developing tools for decision-making. If confirmed, will you support the CSCs? If so, how?

**Response:** If confirmed, I will evaluate CSCs as I would each program under the Department's purview and that would entail assessing program effectiveness, efficiency and compatibility with Secretary's Zinke's priorities and those of the Administration.

**Question 9:** Do you promise to uphold the merit system principles set forth in Chapter 23 Title 5 U.S. Code, which prohibit factors other than merit from consideration in civil service employment decisions?

**Response:** I support the merit system principles.

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**Question 10:** The Holman Rule allows any member of Congress to propose amending an appropriations bill to single out a government employee or cut a specific program. If confirmed, do you commit to opposing any acts of Congress to individually target DOI employees based on political whims?

**Response:** Congress sets its rules. If confirmed, it will be my responsibility to follow the law and advise the Secretary on any proposal that effects the Department, and I will do so.

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**Questions from Senator Steve Daines**

**Question 1:** Should you be confirmed to your position as Assistant Secretary of Policy, Management and Budget, you will play a leading role in the management of employees and will be responsible for their health and safety. As my first action as Chairman of the National Parks Subcommittee I held an oversight hearing focusing on the increase of sexual harassment cases in the parks. It is one of my top priorities to solve this problem and make the Park Service and Department of Interior a safe and healthy place to work. Will you work with me and Secretary Zinke to address this problem and foster a culture of ‘Zero-Tolerance’ at DOI?

**Response:** Sexual harassment in the workplace is unacceptable and I echo Secretary Zinke’s zero tolerance policy. You have my commitment to work with you to address this very serious issue, should I be confirmed.

**Question 2:** The Deferred Maintenance Backlog is a problem that needs serious thought and consideration. If confirmed, you will play a chief role in the budget of DOI and the Park Service. Will you work with me and the other members of this committee to find a solution to the ever-increasing backlog?

**Response:** Yes. I know addressing the deferred maintenance backlog on nation’s public lands, namely our National Parks, is one of Secretary Zinke’s top priorities.

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**Questions from Senator Joe Manchin III**

**Question 1:** Ms. Combs as you know well, President Trump is a vocal advocate for coal miners—a priority we both share given West Virginia’s economy and history. The Department of the Interior’s Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM) distributes millions of dollars of federal funds to the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Funds. OSMRE transfers the funds from two sources: the excess of the Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Fund and the General Fund of the U.S. Treasury. President Trump’s budget for FY2018 proposes \$134 million dollars in payments to United Mine Workers of America Health benefit Plans from Treasury Funds. This is a remarkable reduction of \$45 million from FY2016 spending levels. The Budget Justification for OSMRE has a notation that says, “FY 2018 estimates are based on economic assumptions as of March 2017.” I think we need additional details on those assumptions. But, additionally, I secured passage of a permanent health care fix for 22,600 orphan UMWA miners in the May 2017 spending bill. These UMWA beneficiaries were within days of losing rightfully earned healthcare coverage. Ms. Combs, given the importance of your role in the Department, I want to be certain that you understand that when it comes to these funds, we actually are talking about life and death.

Will you commit to working with me to ensure that OSM is appropriately resourced to ensure that the UMWA reserves the appropriate amount of funding in keeping with current law and that all eligible health beneficiaries receive their health care?

**Response:** I am not familiar with the intricacies of funding for the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Funds, and I would need to learn more about the specifics of this issue. I would be happy to do so, if confirmed.

**Question 2:** I’d like to get a better understanding of the Administration’s plans for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which you will play a critical role in managing. My constituents would like to see increased recreation access for our sportsmen and sportswomen. It is a priority for me to find ways to maintain a vibrant outdoor economy, and to honor the deep connection Americans have with our national parks and public lands. For more than 50 years, LWCF has been a persistent success for some of the most cherished public lands and the communities that depend on them. In my state, LWCF is the reason you and your agencies have the Harpers Ferry and the Gauley and New Rivers National Recreation Areas. In 2016, West Virginia received more than \$400,000 in grants from the state side of LWCF. These funds were used for all sorts of upgrades that will make West Virginia outdoors even more wild and wonderful. So, I was disappointed by the President’s FY18 budget recommendation for LWCF to gut the program by 84% and stop many conservation and access projects dead in their track. Furthermore, the budget offers what I consider a false a choice between addressing the maintenance backlog in our parks and conserving public access. Good management requires that you do both, just as I worked to do with West Virginia’s state parks when they were under my care as governor. That’s what you did as Comptroller of Texas.

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Simple yes or no question, do you support permanent reauthorization of LWCF?

**Response:** Yes, I believe the LWCF program has been an important and valuable program.

Do you have any recommended policy proposals for permanent LWCF reauthorization that you would like to share with the Committee today?

**Response:** As I am not at the Department or a member of the Administration, I do not have any policy proposals to recommend at this time. Should I be confirmed, I would look forward to getting up to speed on the specifics of LWCF and to working with you and this Committee on where and how this program could be improved to be more prudent with taxpayer dollars and to ensuring appropriate state and local support for LWCF projects.



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**Questions from Senator Martin Heinrich**

**Question 1:** In 2014, Congress made improvements to sec. 365 of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 to provide additional resources to seven of BLM's busiest field offices to hire and support sufficient staff to meet current demands. Subsection 365(e) requires BLM to report to Congress annually on the allocation of the additional funds among the seven Project offices and the accomplishments of each office. The first annual report, due February 2016, has never been submitted to Congress as required by law. The second report was due in February 2017. Will you work to expedite the completion of BLM's two long-overdue reports as required by law?

**Response:** Although I am not aware of the status of the reports, I will look into this if confirmed.

**Question 2:** I continue to hear about problems arising from the large number of long-standing job vacancies in BLM's field offices in New Mexico. Of particular concern are significant vacancies in Farmington, the Federal Indian Minerals Office and Carlsbad. Currently there are about 60 vacant positions in BLM offices in New Mexico, with as many as 21 vacant positions in Carlsbad alone. Clearly the administration's hiring freeze contributed to the delay in filling these important federal jobs. What actions will you take to address promptly the need to fill the large number of job vacancies in New Mexico's various BLM offices?

**Response:** Although I am not aware of the status of current job vacancies within the Department's bureaus or efforts to fill those positions, Secretary Zinke has stressed one of his priorities is to get the right tools and resources out to the field, and I will look into this if confirmed.

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**Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto**

**Question 1:** Do you believe in sound science determining policy?

**Response:** Yes, I do.

**Question 2:** Do you believe the government should adequately invest in the programs that make a difference in lives of the communities in my state and across the country?

**Response:** Yes, I believe in smart investments of public dollars that are targeted, effective and appropriately balance needs with available resources.

**Question 3:** What more can DOI do for our communities?

**Response:** I believe fundamentally that DOI can be a better partner with communities and state and local governments that are most directly affected by the decisions the Department makes. I believe this can be achieved through close collaboration and conversation and I believe my record in the state of Texas working with a variety of stakeholders demonstrates my commitment to this goal. This includes working with Native American communities through a commitment to tribal consultation and strengthening tribal sovereignty in Indian Country. I fully agree with Secretary Zinke's priority of being a listening advocate rather than a deaf adversary and should I be confirmed, this would be a foundational principle of my service.

**Question 4:** What do you think should be budgetary priorities for your office/Department?

**Response:** Broadly, among my priorities would be to refocus decision-making to the front lines, address the maintenance backlog on our public lands and increase public access to public resources, as articulated by Secretary Zinke.

**Question 5:** Why do you believe you are qualified for the position you are nominated for?

**Response:** I believe that the eight years that I served as Comptroller of the State of Texas have given me the ability to analyze, understand and consider how to achieve the Department's mission in an efficient, open and transparent manner. Additionally, I share Secretary's priorities for the Department – refocusing decision-making to the front lines, addressing the maintenance backlog on our public lands and increase public access to public resources. The lessons that I learned and the skills that I have gained will serve as assets, should I be confirmed, in the Department in balancing the books, making smart investments and increasing the efficient operation of the Department's important programs.

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**Question 6:** If Secretary Zinke reassigns functions in some of your offices/departments and moves forward with decentralizing the Washington, DC office to regional offices, what do you believe should be reassigned to regional offices?

**Response:** Because I have not had a role at the Department, I cannot speak with any specificity on the issue of Departmental reorganization. However, should I be confirmed, I look forward to exploring in greater depth how we can better align bureau resources to improve decision-making and I would welcome the opportunity to working with you and members of this Committee in doing so.

**Question 7:** What do you believe should remain as a priority in your office?

**Response:** The office of Policy, Management and Budget is home to a wide array of departmental functions including budget formulation, personnel management and hiring, law enforcement, wildland fire management, IT security, and resource revenue accounting to name only a few. I have not yet had the opportunity to fully assess these specific programs, but as a general matter, I would prioritize the need to balance fiscal prudence with needs in making these assessments.

**Question 8:** Your agency, like so many others within the federal government, have dealt with continued shortfalls in budgetary funding, which has hurt our government's ability to partner effectively with private industry and have inflicted negative impacts on our nation's parks, forests and wildlife conservation programs. Do you believe more funding would allow the Interior Department to be a better partner to industry and the taxpayer?

**Response:** From my time as Comptroller of the State of Texas, I know that sufficient resources are needed to carry out any public function. I also know that resources are limited and the money alone cannot solve any problem. I believe that decisions with public dollars must be fully informed and made very carefully with the objective of maximizing efficiencies with those resources.

**Question 9:** Nevada is second in the nation in the amount of geothermal power produced and has the country's largest untapped geothermal resources. However, the Administration's budget repeals the 25 percent share of revenue distribution for geothermal royalties that is provided to counties. These royalties provide up to 10% of revenues to counties in Nevada, so the repeal would be harmful to our local economies. Do you agree with repealing these payments? Isn't this a promise to rural areas, like those in my home state?

**Response:** As the former Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, I am aware that federal revenue payments can be important to state and local economies. However, I need to learn more about the specifics of this issue. I would be happy to do so, if confirmed.