

**Testimony of Pat Pitney
Interim President, University of Alaska
Before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Public Lands, Forests, & Mining Subcommittee
Legislative Hearing**

Wednesday, June 16, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Cortez-Masto, Ranking Member Lee, Senator Murkowski and other members of the subcommittee, my name is Pat Pitney, and I am the Interim President of the University Of Alaska. I am here today on behalf of the University of Alaska's Board of Regents, students, faculty and staff, as I speak in strong support of S.1128, the University of Alaska Fiscal Foundation Act.

The University of Alaska is a land-, sea- and space-grant system of higher education which was established in 1917. The UA system is the only public, higher education system in Alaska, and comprises three separately accredited institutions located in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Juneau serving more than 22,000 full-and part-time students working towards 500 unique degree, certificate or endorsement programs.

The University of Alaska, although a land-grant institution, is land poor due to historical anomalies that prevented it from receiving the full benefit of lands that Congress and the Alaska Territorial Legislature intended for it to receive. Despite Alaska's status as the geographically largest state in the U.S., all but one state (Delaware) received more federal land grants for their universities than did the University of Alaska. Several attempts through the Alaska Legislature and various legal proceedings have not yielded a path forward for this 62-year-old dilemma.

The legislation, S. 1128, seeks to remedy this by creating a voluntary program to identify lands for conveyance. Working with the Department of Interior, the State of Alaska and the University of Alaska, candidate lands would be identified from the State of Alaska's selection through the Alaska Statehood Act. Governor Michael Dunleavy's administration has been instrumental in the crafting of this legislation, and the state is supportive of the university securing lands that would contribute to its long-term financial stability.

The University of Alaska, like many other public institutions of higher education, has experienced a severe decline in financial support. The university's operating budget has been reduced by \$101 million since 2014, and under the current budget environment, will be reduced by an additional \$4.3 million in FY2022. Additionally, the university faces a COVID-19 impact in FY2022 estimated to be between \$20-26 million.

As Alaska's only system for public higher-education, the University of Alaska has one of the most unique roles among its peers -- three separately accredited, four-year institutions that award baccalaureate to doctoral degrees. Additionally, the university has 13 community colleges that award certificates and associate's degrees from aviation maintenance to welding and metal fabrication.

The university serves the entire state, and is physically dispersed across a landscape of nearly 1,300 miles, roughly the distance between the U.S. Capitol and Wichita, Kansas. Despite these enormous geographic and financial challenges, the University of Alaska is, and will always be, the key to Alaska's economic recovery from COVID-19 and to the state's overall economic prosperity. It is estimated that for every dollar invested in the university, \$3 of economic activity is generated.

This bill, as the title implies, will lay the groundwork for a fiscal foundation for which the university can use to continue to grow its mission of inspiring learning, and advancing and disseminating knowledge through teaching, research, and public service. Thank you for your consideration of the legislation and I look forward to answering any questions.

Thank you.