



Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on Critical Minerals
May 12, 2015

“Thank you, Chairman Murkowski, for calling this important hearing on critical minerals. I know you have been dedicated for many years to this subject in seeking to reform federal policy on critical minerals. And this hearing is particularly timely as we work on bipartisan energy legislation in the committee.

“The topic today reminds us again how integrated the energy sector is within the larger economy. And that the U.S. energy renaissance, especially the growth in clean electricity generation, simply could not happen without critical minerals.

“From grid storage batteries to wind turbines, and catalytic converters to LED lights: critical minerals, including rare earth metals, make clean energy possible.

“According to the International Renewable Energy Agency, there are about 625,000 clean energy jobs in the United States. And the independent business group Environmental Entrepreneurs has found that clean energy projects have led to over 230,000 job announcements in the last three years. Every one of those jobs in our new economy has some tie to mineral supply chains.

“And so the problem of rare earth metals being hoarded by China remains a pressing problem for our clean energy economy and our national security.

“It was only a few years ago that China cut its rare earth export quota by 72 percent. When 97 percent of the rare earth metals are produced in China, this amounts to a very serious challenge.

“Since 2009, the United States has been forced to file trade complaints over China’s trade restrictions of minerals including bauxite, magnesium, zinc, tungsten, molybdenum and rare earth metals. Only at the very last moment, after stretching out the dispute for years, did China comply with its trade obligations under the World Trade Organization.

“In 2010, European Commission went through an exercise similar to the one outlined in the Chairman’s bill, which proposes that the U.S. Geological Survey establish a ‘criticality’ threshold for various minerals. This is an important step, but I think it’s also key to recognize the dynamic nature of these supply chains. As new technologies and manufacturing processes alter these dynamics, the concept of ‘criticality’ similarly shifts and the market will quite often also generate solutions.

“In addition to pressing for stronger trade enforcement actions to protect our supply chains, we can also do more to innovate here at home. If we can accelerate the development cycle for new materials, industry will be better able to navigate around any emerging criticalities—whether real or perceived.

“This is part of the important work being done by the Department of Energy’s Critical Materials Hub. Headquartered at Ames Laboratory in Iowa, the hub brings together a number of pre-eminent institutions in the United States, including Idaho and Oak Ridge National Labs and the Colorado School of Mines.

“Recycling is another important component of the strategy. Dr. Silberglitt’s prepared testimony explains the example of tungsten well. I was struck by the fact that between 2010 and 2011, U.S. manufacturers reduced imports of tungsten by one-third through recycling efforts. I look forward to learning more about that opportunity.

“I am pleased that the introduced version of the bill maintains language about alternatives to critical minerals and workforce needs, as she just mentioned, because this is also very important.

“The core function in the bill before us today, establishing and maintaining a critical minerals list, would fall to Dr. Kimball’s agency, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

“So I look forward to hearing today what the USGS is able to do on critical minerals with its existing authority and how the bill will change that.

“And finally, while I think this is an important act, I continue to believe that we need to do a better job overall of addressing the legacy of hard rock mining in this country. According to the Forest Service, there are nearly 2,000 abandoned mines in my state of Washington alone.

“I believe we need a 21st century hard rock mining program. We should tighten reclamation standards and establish royalty payments like those of other natural resources.

“Again, thank you for convening this important hearing today, Chairman Murkowski. I look forward to our witnesses’ testimony.”

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