



**Opening Statement**  
**Hearing on the Department of the Interior's FY 2021 Budget Request**  
**Chairman Lisa Murkowski**  
**March 10, 2020**

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

Not too many of us here this morning in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, it's kind of a fowl day. Mr. Secretary, I'm sorry, that you're coming before the committee this morning when we thought that we were going to have some relatively good news for your department, and the Department of Energy, because we thought would be moving forward with a package of energy-related bills that we've been working on for well over a year. In many cases for years.

Equities from some 70 different members of the Senate. And we're stalled out right now, we're not done, but we are certainly stalled out. Not because of the good strong work that people on this committee have not participated in, but because of matters completely unrelated to the jurisdiction of this committee. Completely unrelated to anything that we had been working on prior to it. And so we're stalled out right now. As a Committee Chairman it makes me wonder why we work so hard around here to try to incorporate the good work of so many, if the purpose is going to be to just tank good committee work.

So, I'm not in a particularly good mood, but my mood shouldn't have anything to do with your responsibility as the Secretary of the Department of the Interior and all that you're seeking to do. But I do know that the work of the Congress, the work that we can do, can help you do your job much more efficiently and better.

And so it's incumbent upon us to update our policies, working with the administration, to make sure that you've got the tools so that you can best proceed. So whether it is initiatives like we are trying to advance with our American Mineral Security Act that can help agencies like USGS do more. Know that we're going to continue to focus our efforts as we work through this process that has come to an unfortunate pause right now.

So, I want to welcome you back to the committee. It was just about a year ago I think that you were sitting here in the same chair for your confirmation hearing. I'm glad that have been in this place now for a year. I'm glad that we were able to give you a Deputy Secretary, Kate MacGregor. I think that you've got some good folks working over there.

You know that in Alaska we look very closely and critically at what comes out of the Department of the Interior, because in many ways we have to be working hand in glove with you as a state that has such significant lands under federal management.

So whether we are talking about lifting public land orders, activities on the NPR-A, access for the good people in King Cove, we do a lot with you and we appreciate that good work.

So, to the budget for Fiscal Year 2021, the administration has requested \$12.8 billion for the Department of the Interior. That's a reduction of about \$2 billion, or 16 percent, from last year's enacted. And while this year's request is not perfect, and I'm sure you will hear from colleagues here this morning, I do acknowledge some real positives within it.

For starters, the budget highlights the Dingell Act, our seminal public lands package that became law just about a year ago now. That was good work from this committee, and it was recognized as such. Again, we want to try to do more of that, but the Dingell Act has done well. The steps to promote access for hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting activities on public lands, the new economic development opportunities for states and local governments, that advances at the same time measured and responsible, locally-supported conservation. Some of these things are very specific to Alaska, so I'll ask to you in my questions this morning more directly about the Department's implementation.

The budget request also maintains our shared commitment to an all-of-the above energy strategy by investing in renewable energy development, promoting hydropower, wind, geothermal, and solar energy on federal lands and waters – that's why we have to get an energy bill through. Because these initiatives that you're working on will be bolstered by updated policies. It also continues the oil and gas development program in Alaska's 1002 Area, in the non-wilderness portion of ANWR. We are all looking forward to a successful lease sale this year.

I'm also grateful that the budget mentions the maintenance needs of the Denali Road in Denali National Park [and Preserve]. This is in my view a clear definition of critical infrastructure. As you know, there's only one way in to that park, and right now this road is compromised. We had an opportunity to talk about this last week, when you were before my Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. I said it there, and will say again, that a longer-term solution to keep that road open and safe is really what we need.

This budget proposal also invests in wildland fire programs, including a new initiative to build a better wildfire firefighting workforce. That is designed to help implement active forest management activities, including hazardous fuel reduction and fire breaks to reduce wildfire risk and severity. So I'm looking forward to more discussion about this proposal

We had a tough year, as you know, in Alaska with last year's fire season. [The Swan Lake Fire on the Kenai Peninsula had] more than 2.5 million acres burned. It was the most expensive fire in the country, burned for nearly four months, and started on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in an area that has seen serious bark beetle infestation.

We expect this same area will again be an active landscape this fire season, and so I'm concerned about the cuts proposed to programs that support state and tribal partnerships, such as wildlife management and collaborative landscape conservation. I think these partnerships are important to address not only the beetle outbreak, but also the issues related to vegetation management. I also think we should be looking at extending Good Neighbor authority to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service so that we can partner more effectively in places like the Kenai. We know that wildfire don't know any boundaries there, so that's something I'd like to discuss with you.

Last point is the cuts. The deep cuts for the USGS in their natural hazards programs, particularly earthquake and volcano hazards program. Senator Cantwell and I have worked in these areas for some time. It is certainly critical to Alaska. We had, again, 2019 another standout year for seismicity in Alaska. The Anchorage earthquake in late 2018, still very much on the minds of folks. There was another earthquake over the weekend. But, it just reminds you, when it comes to volcanoes, we started 2020 with an eruption at Shishaldin and [believe that Semisopchnoi may have erupted] recently, as well. So I want to talk to you about that.

I am pleased that the budget bolsters reforms to the Department's workplace culture and anti-harassment programs. The Departmental Ethics Office in the Office of the Solicitor received a plus-up in training and staffing, and it looks like some of these misconduct complaints are on the decline. So that's important for you, I certainly would encourage you in those efforts. We've had a conversation about this, and I think we all agree that employee misconduct of any kind within any department, but certainly under your leadership there at Interior.

With that I'll close my comments, turn to Senator Manchin for his, so that we can get to member's questions and concerns. But again, Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here this morning, and I look forward to the discussion.

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