

Published on *American Geosciences Institute* (<https://www.americangeosciences.org>)

Home > Hearings examine priorities outlined in the FY 2019 Department of the Interior budget request

Hearings examine priorities outlined in the FY 2019 Department of the Interior budget request

March 15, 2018

Following the release of President Donald Trump's fiscal year (FY) 2019 budget request, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke defended the budget proposal for his department to members of Congress on relevant House and Senate committees.

The President's request for the Department of the Interior (DOI) includes a total of \$11.7 billion in discretionary appropriations for FY 2019, which is a reduction of more than \$1 billion from the current funding level. The budget request includes funding for construction and deferred maintenance to help address DOI's existing maintenance backlog of over \$16 billion. It also includes a legislative proposal to establish the Public Lands Infrastructure Fund (PLIF), supported by revenue from energy and mineral development, that will provide up to \$18 billion for repairs and other infrastructure improvement needs of the national parks, national wildlife refuges, and Bureau of Indian Education-funded schools.

At the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing on March 13, Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) noted that while she does not agree with everything in the FY 2019 request, she appreciates that it focuses on taking care of the lands the federal government already owns and will help the U.S. increase responsible production of our abundant natural resources.

However, the tone of the hearing shifted when Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA) stated her belief that the Secretary has abandoned the responsibility of stewardship of our public lands, referencing this Administration's controversial national monument reductions at Bears Ears and Grande Staircase-Escalante and proposed five-year leasing plan for offshore oil and gas production. Senator Cantwell later questioned Secretary Zinke about recent allegations that he used public funds for "a private jet home from Las Vegas," an issue which the inspector general is now investigating, as well as other reports of questionable spending at the agency. Secretary Zinke responded that he "never took a private jet anywhere" and defended his travel, asserting that these allegations are misleading, insulting, and inappropriate.

Two days later, the House Committee on Natural Resources held a similar hearing, where Secretary Zinke again provided his testimony expressing that the budget supports Interior programs that play a critical role in encouraging national infrastructure development. The hearing also addressed the proposed reorganization plan to create common regional boundaries for all Interior bureaus, which includes the potential for relocation of certain bureau headquarters to western states – a change intended to improve internal agency collaboration and efficiency by shifting more authority to communities out West, where the government owns huge swaths of land. Although some committee members noted their support of these reorganization ideas as well as recent DOI efforts, such as those to increase energy revenue for the nation, other members criticized the Administration's five-year plan to expand offshore drilling and the proposed elimination of the of the popular Land and Water Conservation Fund in the President's FY 2019 budget request. Secretary Zinke defended the Administration's budget, explaining that while the Department will continue to emphasize energy development, its priorities this year revolve around "conservation, infrastructure, and reorganization."

Sources: E&E News, U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Western Governors Association
