

Full committee hearing - Department of the Interior's FY 2016 budget

Witnesses

Honorable Sally Jewell, Secretary

Mike Connor, Deputy Secretary

Committee Members Present

Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Chairman

Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Ranking Member

John Barrasso (R-WY)

Mazie Hirono (D-HI)

Angus King (I-ME)

Rob Portman (R-OH)

Martin Heinrich (D-NM)

Bill Cassidy (R-LA)

John Hoeven (R-ND)

Al Franken (D-MN)

Joe Manchin (D-WV)

Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV)

Jeff Flake (R-AZ)

James Risch (R-ID)

Mike Lee (R-UT)

Ron Wyden (D-OR)

On February 24, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a hearing regarding the President's proposed fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget priorities for the Department of the Interior (DOI). Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Deputy Secretary Mike Connor answered senators' questions regarding some of the President's priorities, including natural gas and coal on public lands, water resources, National Parks Service infrastructure, sage grouse, and schools for Native Americans among other things. Chairman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) expressed her displeasure with DOI and the Obama Administration's decisions to remove 10 million acres of Arctic waters from possible drilling and declaring 12 million acres of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness, including some of the oil-rich coastal plain. Sen. Murkowski called these actions an "attack on Alaska", and stated these actions would weaken the economy and potentially shut down the Alaska pipeline. Secretary Jewell pointed out that 90 percent of the Arctic Ocean's gas resources are still available for leasing.

Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Ranking Member of the committee, and Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) raised concerns over coal royalties on public lands. In some instances, they argued, the rates at which companies can lease land mean they pay only a dollar in clean up costs for every \$70 incurred by the federal government. Sen. Cantwell did however praise DOI for their work developing renewable energy sources on public lands.

Several senators raised concerns about rural water and drought. The Land & Water Conservation Fund celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2015, and Senator Wyden praised the FY 2016 budget proposal to fully fund that program, which reinvests royalties from offshore oil and gas activities into public lands, and the allocation of \$58 million dollars for WaterSMART's work addressing drought.

Senator John Barrasso (R-WY) queried Secretary Jewell about overlapping state and federal hydraulic fracturing regulations on public land. Secretary Jewell testified that the federal rules were meant as baseline regulation; more stringent state regulations take precedence over the federal rules. Jewell expressed support for oil and natural gas development on federal land, explaining the importance of funding for inspections to allow the permitting process to move faster. Sec. Jewell also expressed interest in creating more gas gathering lines on federal lands to help prevent flaring and venting of natural gas.

Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) expressed his displeasure that DOI spent less of the funds gained from offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico on wetland and shore replenishment and rebuilding in his state than he felt was fair. Sec. Jewell stated that the agency attempts to invest funds acquired in federal waters for the benefit of all Americans.

Secretary Jewell expressed support for Senator Wyden and Senator Mike Crapo's (R-ID) proposed bill that would change the funding structure for wildfire suppression.

This hearing was the first in a string of hearings that will examine the President's FY 2016 budget request before Congress submits their own proposals later this spring.
