

Chairman Ken Calvert
Interior & Environment Subcommittee
House Committee on Appropriations
Department of the Interior FY15 Budget Hearing
Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell
Tuesday, March 25, 2014
Opening Statement As Prepared

The Committee will come to order.

Secretary Jewell, I'd like to welcome you to today's hearing, along with Deputy Secretary, Mike Connor, as well as Rhea Suh, and our good friend, Pam Haze. Our hearing today will address the fiscal year 2015 budget priorities for the Department of the Interior.

Before we begin, I'd like to congratulate Mike Conner for his recent confirmation as Deputy Secretary. I've worked with Mike in his past life as the Director of the Bureau of Reclamation and I know that he will work hard with Secretary Jewell to address some of the immense challenges facing the Department and our country.

I'd also like to welcome the newest member of our subcommittee—Chris Stewart from the great state of Utah. Chris, it's great to have you on the subcommittee.

Madam Secretary, this is your first formal budget hearing before our subcommittee as Secretary of the Interior. I'm grateful for the opportunities that you and I have had to meet on several occasions to discuss the many challenges facing your Department. Funding for fire suppression; Endangered Species Act issues; funding for PILT; the severe drought affecting the West and my home state of California—it's clear that we have a lot of work to do addressing some very tough issues.

While we won't agree on every single issue, I know from our conversations that we both recognize the importance of listening to other points of view in trying to find common ground and solving problems. I'd like to mention a few things before we receive your testimony.

First, the challenge of providing adequate wildfire funding each year is one of the greatest challenges facing our subcommittee. The cost of fighting wildfires—particularly the one percent of the most catastrophic fires that consume 30 percent of the fire budget—continues to grow each year. Of course, this puts pressure on every other account in our bill.

I want to applaud my good friend and our former subcommittee chairman, Mike Simpson, for his efforts to address this issue through his bipartisan legislation which proposes that we treat catastrophic fires as we do other natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. I'm a cosponsor of his bill along with six other members of this subcommittee and encourage other members to join this effort.

Another challenge facing the Department and the subcommittee relates to the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA, in my opinion, was a well-intentioned statute that is long-overdue for a major overhaul. Like a number of my colleagues, I'm concerned that any future decision by the Department to list the sage grouse under the ESA would have a devastating effect in the West with consequences felt across our entire national economy. If the Department lists the sage grouse, oil and gas development in the West would be largely curtailed. The impact of the listing of the spotted owl some years ago would pale by comparison.

Identifying a stable, long-term funding mechanism for the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program is another major challenge. PILT has been a mandatory program under the jurisdiction of authorizing committees since fiscal year 2008. Fortunately, PILT was carried in the farm bill earlier this year. This is yet another challenging funding issue in need of a long-term solution.

Lastly, we are in the midst of a drought that is likely to have far-reaching consequences on families and businesses in the West, particularly in my home state of California. This subcommittee is limited in what it can do to address the drought but I believe you, Madame Secretary, are in a position to ensure that the Department does not repeat what I view as past mistakes in releasing critical water supplies into the Pacific Ocean.

In closing, Madam Secretary, I want to express my appreciation to your fine professional staff. Our subcommittee simply couldn't do its work without the folks sitting next to you and those sitting behind you. Thanks to each of you for everything you do.

#####