



Chairman Ken Calvert

*Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations*

Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Hearing - Department of the Interior February 25, 2015 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. Our hearing today will address the fiscal year 2016 budget priorities for the Department of the Interior.

Madam Secretary, this is your second formal budget hearing before our subcommittee as Secretary of the Interior. At the outset, I'd like to thank you for the opportunities we've had recently to discuss many of the challenges facing your Department and this Committee. Funding for fire suppression; Endangered Species Act issues; Indian education; PILT funding; the severe drought affecting the West including my home state of California—these are all issues your Department and this Subcommittee must continue to address together.

Today's hearing marks the beginning of a very candid conversation about your Department's funding priorities. Overall, the President's fiscal year 2016 budget request provides \$11.8 billion in discretionary funding for Department of the Interior programs under this subcommittee's jurisdiction, an 11 percent increase over the fiscal year 2015 enacted level. While your budget request includes funding increases for many notable programs and priorities, I have an obligation to remind you and everyone in this room that, again this year, we are operating in a very constrained funding environment.

To be frank, I'm concerned that your budget request raises expectations that simply cannot be met. As you know, the President and Congress agreed upon statutory spending caps through the Budget Control Act. This budget request ignores those statutory caps.

On this point, let me be very clear—because we are bound by spending caps under existing law, the 11 percent spending increase reflected in your budget request is simply not a realistic outcome. We will do our best to address the highest priority needs but, as we've discussed, any increases to specific accounts or programs will likely have to be offset against other accounts and programs in this bill.

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. In that spirit, I'd like to mention a few things before we receive your testimony.

First, the challenge of providing adequate wildfire funding each year remains 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. Naturally, 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 continuing 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. Eight members of this subcommittee are cosponsors of the Simpson bill.

Another challenge facing the Department and the subcommittee is the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA is a well-intentioned statute but is long-overdue for a legislative and budgetary overhaul. The ESA unfairly stacks the deck in favor of listings, creating a cottage industry for those making a living out of suing the government to list species.

These lawsuits drive the budget and relegate recovered species to the back burner, where they wait—sometimes for eight years or more—until the Fish and Wildlife Service formally proposes to take them *off* the list. The Fish and Wildlife Service should be held to the same standard for listing *and* delisting, and we ought to structure the budget and the law accordingly.

Driving the budget today is a potential listing of sage grouse. Western States are leading an unprecedented effort to conserve sage grouse so that a listing isn't necessary. If the Department lists the sage grouse, American consumers will feel the impact at the gas pump and in their monthly utility bills.

The settlement agreement deadline of September 30, 2015, is arbitrary, and Congress has an obligation to continue to consider whether to override this deadline if necessary. In the meantime, I look forward to our discussion today about the funding increase proposed for sage grouse in FY16.

Identifying stable, long-term funding for the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program is another major challenge. So long as the Federal government continues to propose acquiring more land—without guaranteeing that counties will be fairly compensated for their lost tax revenue—serious questions will continue to be raised about more Federal land acquisition—especially in the West. Until a long-term funding solution is identified, PILT will continue putting pressure on LWCF and other programs within this bill.

Lastly, we are in the midst of a drought resulting in far-reaching consequences affecting 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. However, you are in a position to make a difference by ensuring that the Department does not repeat past mistakes that have exacerbated conditions on the ground.

In closing, Madam Secretary, I want to express my appreciation to your fine professional staff. This is a team effort and our subcommittee simply couldn't do its work without your budget shop, the various bureaus, and the folks sitting behind you. Thanks to each of you for everything you do.

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