



Chairman Hal Rogers

House Committee on Appropriations

Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Hearing – Department of the Interior
February 25, 2015
Opening Statement As Prepared

Mr. Chairman, thank you for yielding. Secretary Jewell and Deputy Secretary Connor, I appreciate you taking the time to be here today.

The Department of Interior oversees numerous entities, each uniquely charged with the stewardship of our natural resources and national heritage. Your Department was tremendously helpful to my District just last year in working closely with the Corps of Engineers to raise the water level at Lake Cumberland back up to its historic pool level and save an endangered fish known as the Duskytail Darter in the process. I appreciate the expeditious manner in which your Department handled these issues. I also appreciate that this Department has finally observed this Committee's strong insistence that you refrain from cutting the Office of Surface Mining's state grant programs and proposing fees on industry as a way to make up the difference. I am pleased to see that your budget reflects the strong objections made by this Committee in previous years and discontinues the fee proposal.

Your budget request begins with a homage to President Obama's new and oft-quoted mantra of "middle class economics." As you well know, your Department is the steward of 20% of our country's land and accompanying resources, the largest supplier and manager of water in 17 states, the guardian of our National Parks and historic areas, and the primary regulator of surface mines in the Eastern US – so there is no question that it should play an important role in helping middle class America grow and flourish. Unfortunately, Madame Secretary, there are a number of issues with this budget request and larger, politically-driven policy priorities within the Department that cause me to question this Administration's commitment to middle class growth and our country's economic and energy security.

Energy costs have a direct impact on job creation, public health, and nearly every other issue of national importance. Families, schools, medical facilities and businesses of all sizes rely on cheap, reliable energy to keep our communities thriving and plan for the future. However, unrestrained regulatory requirements put forth by your Department are already raising energy costs on businesses and employees alike, forcing everyone to make tough choices - and some onto the unemployment lines.

In particular, I continue to be dismayed at the efforts of this Administration to summarily scrap and rewrite the 2008 stream buffer zone rule. Your Department has invested over \$8 million in a grossly mismanaged rule-making process - trying to redraft a rule that was meticulously crafted

and thoroughly studied over a period of 5 years. The more we learn about the new rule, the more we realize what a bad deal it is. Officials at your own Department claimed that it would save no more than 15 miles of stream – because, in reality, it would simply force the Appalachian coal industry to close its doors and set up shop elsewhere. This will have a tremendous impact on surface mining, an industry that sustains over 3,100 miners in Kentucky. Rewriting this rule jeopardizes thousands of jobs, in a region where unemployment is already as high as 11% in some counties – all for the sake of miniscule environmental gains.

Though coal plants are closing around the country under the weight of costly regulations and mine operators are dragged through arduous permitting exercises, the coal industry isn't the only victim of the Administration's misguided energy policies. We've seen oil exploration aggressively stymied and much-needed pipeline construction projects backburnered, or worse - VETOED. Meanwhile, the press has been flooded in recent weeks with accounts of so-called sustainable or renewable energy projects that are doing irreparable harm to the environment -- sometimes at taxpayer expense: wind farms are devastating populations of rare birds and bats to the tune of millions per year, and solar panels are loaded with harmful pollutants and toxins. I am certainly not an opponent of renewable energy or environmental protection, but I do oppose government meddling in the energy marketplace that results in the artificial selection of winners and losers. For federal regulations to overtake the marketplace as the decider of our country's energy portfolio is not safe for our present or our future.

It may seem like it from Washington, but there is no winner in this approach to American energy policy. My District in Kentucky is currently facing some of the highest unemployment rates in the country, and the President's proposal to mitigate the destructive impact of his policies, the so-called POWER Plus plan, is a passing glance to communities that are in real pain. The most significant POWER+ proposals that fall under the purview of your Department involve mandatory spending programs, meaning they will require legislative action outside of this Committee to be realized. You know, and I know, that this is not a real proposal until it is authorized. While it is somewhat refreshing to see this Administration finally take ownership of the devastation wrought by the President's policies – the bottom line is that these ARE *coal* communities. We need regulatory relief so that we can keep mines open, bring back some of these high-paying stable jobs, and keep electricity rates around the country low in order for businesses to flourish. While we in Eastern Kentucky work together to diversify and grow our economy, we can't lose sight of the fact that coal has kept the lights on for centuries – and that has to be a part of the conversation moving forward.

The way we handle these issues today will have a profound effect on energy security in this country. I hope that you will provide some insight as to how your Department plans to balance its dual roles of protecting our national resources and supporting the provision of reliable energy and economic opportunity. Thank you.

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