



**FROM:** Kountoupes Denham Carr & Reid

**DATE:** Tuesday, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025

**RE:** House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Budget Hearing on the U.S. Department of Interior

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### **Topline Summary**

- Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies convened to discuss the FY 2026 budget of the U.S. Department of Interior
- Democrats voiced concerns over the proposed budget cuts to the department, particularly affecting tribal programs, clean energy investments, national parks, and staffing. They pushed for the release of already-appropriated funds and criticized the delay by OMB, warning it could violate federal law. Rep. McCollum called out the 35% DOI cut and layoffs, citing negative impacts on public services and historical preservation. Rep. Harder focused on wildfire response, advocating for better benefits and reimbursements for local firefighters, and found alignment with Secretary Burgum on those points.
- Republicans largely supported Secretary Burgum's approach and highlighted shared priorities like energy development, public land management, and tribal partnerships. They acknowledged the challenges in replicating the skinny budget cuts and stressed the need for efficient use of funds and better staffing. They praised Burgum's background and his practical focus on issues like wildland fire management, law enforcement in tribal areas, and streamlining land transfers. They expressed a strong desire to empower states, improve federal-local cooperation, and reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, especially in western states with high federal land ownership. Most also emphasized housing, energy production, and mineral security as key priorities.

**Members Attending:** Chairman Mike Simpson (R-ID), Full Committee Chairman Tom Cole (R-OK), Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-UT), Rep. Mark Amodei (R-NV), Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT), Rep. Jake Ellzey (R-TX), Ranking Member Chellie Pingree (D-ME), Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), Rep. Josh Harder (D-CA)

### **[Live Hearing Link](#)**

*Meeting called to order by Chairman Simpson*

### **Opening Statements**

#### **Chairman Mike Simpson (R-ID):**

The Committee will come to order. This morning I'd like to welcome the 55th Secretary of the Interior, Doug Burgum. Mr. Secretary, this is your first formal budget hearing before our subcommittee. While I am disappointed you didn't arrive in a covered wagon, on behalf of our Members, I'd like to offer our congratulations on your confirmation.



Our hearing today will address the Fiscal Year 2026 budget priorities for the Department of the Interior and provide you with an opportunity to outline your goals for the Department. I thoroughly enjoyed our sit-down meeting hearing firsthand about your time in the private sector as well as governor – and how you plan to apply lessons learned from these experiences to address the many challenges facing the Department.

As a native North Dakotan and former CEO of a successful tech company, you bring a fresh perspective to the Department. I look forward to learning how you plan to reshape the agency while promoting domestic energy production, unlocking critical minerals, addressing the maintenance backlogs at our national parks and public lands, and meeting our treaty and trust obligations throughout Indian Country.

This Committee stands ready to roll up our sleeves and work with you to implement efficiencies and reduce redundancies across the agency so that the focus can be on investments that advance the Department's core mission. Overall, the President's skinny Fiscal Year 2026 budget request provides roughly \$10.6 billion for Department of the Interior programs under this subcommittee's jurisdiction.

While we recognize the administration proposed some deep funding cuts that we likely do not see eye to eye with – especially when it comes to Indian programs and the operation of our Park System – today's hearing is just the first step in our months-long budget review process. I'll note that when it comes to the funding discussions ahead, this subcommittee – under both Republican and Democratic leadership – remains committed to upholding the responsibility of fulfilling our treaty and trust obligations with the Tribes.

I know you have extensive experience engaging with the Tribes during your time as governor, so we look forward to working closely with you to prioritize this year's funding to address the greatest Tribal needs including education, law enforcement, and land management issues. In terms of policy, I look forward to learning how you are working with the White House to unleash American energy, streamline permitting and Endangered Species Act reviews, and improve wildland firefighting. I also want to personally thank you and the administration for halting the Lava Ridge Wind Project in Idaho.

As you well know, this out-of-touch project failed to prioritize the concerns of Idahoans and was rammed through by the previous administration. Secretary Burgum, thank you again for joining us this morning.

Going forward, I hope we can continue to keep an open line of communication to ensure that as this Committee moves through the budget process, we can continue making sound investments to advance the administration's agenda and ensure the long-term well-being of the Department. With that, I yield to the Ranking Member – Ms. Pingree – for any opening remarks she would like to make.

**Ranking Member Chellie Pingree (D-ME):**

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, thank you for holding this hearing this morning, and Secretary Burgum, thank you very much for being with us today. I appreciated that the slight delay in committee gave me a chance to say an initial hello to you, and nice to meet, even though I represent Maine, a fellow Midwesterner, since I was born in Minnesota. Yeah sure, you betcha.

I do want to thank you for bringing your many skills as a former governor and a businessman to this very important position.



The Department of Interior is tasked with protecting and managing our natural resources and cultural heritage, to providing scientific information about those resources, and honoring our trust and treaty responsibilities.

But I will warn you, I am very concerned about the state of the Department of Interior. From my view, in just four months, the Department has been destabilized, and there has been a stunning decline in its ability to meet its mission. Given your extensive executive experience, I am disappointed that you would allow this to happen.

In partnership with Elon Musk's, what I consider a "rogue agency," the DOGE, you have illegally canceled grants for conservation, for ecosystem restoration, and other important work. Over 1,700 probationary employees have been recklessly fired, and 7,600 people, or 11 percent, of the Interior workforce, have been pushed to resign. These are not just numbers—these people are experts and dedicated public servants with decades of programmatic and institutional knowledge that is critically needed to ensure the Department fulfills its mission and is a guardian of our public lands.

To make matters worse, the agency has a hiring freeze, and you are considering even further reductions-in-force. I don't see this ending well for this precious agency, that this committee is dedicated to oversee. And this committee has devoted hundreds of hours to nurturing this agency. I am very proud to serve on a committee that generally works in a bipartisan way to make sure that the Department of Interior stays strong.

Further, due to the policies you have instituted, employees are hamstrung from accomplishing everyday tasks by absurdly limiting credit card expenditures to \$1. This is no way to efficiently run an organization, and in fact these actions seem to be designed to obstruct employees from doing their job.

Even the National Park Service feels that it's been under attack. Ahead of peak season, you have gutted staff. So my national park, like Acadia in my home state of Maine, is understaffed and without the resources needed to keep summer visitors safe. Our parks are pristine and need to be protected.

Fiscal Year 2026 is equally devastating, with a proposed cut to the Department of 30 percent.

That budget eviscerates the U.S. Geological Survey with a proposed \$564 million cut, targeting scientific research on natural hazards, ecosystems, water, and Earth mapping. These programs help us monitor and provide real-time earthquake and hazard information, they strengthen our assessment of groundwater and surface water systems, and they help ensure our national security by informing the management of our mineral and energy resources.

Without these programs at USGS, our communities will be left vulnerable to natural disasters and deprived of the scientific data that guides responsible land management.

This budget with a 30 percent cut shamefully abandons our trust and treaty obligations to Native Americans, slashing the Bureau of Indian Affairs' public safety and justice programs by 19 percent when we are already only meeting a fraction of the need. The budget also chooses to eliminate funding for desperately needed school construction, leaving a \$1 billion repair backlog untouched.

So, Secretary Burgum, the document we are here to discuss today is more than just a budget. It's a blueprint for dismantling the very mission of the Department of Interior—making it impossible to protect



our natural resources and iconic national parks or uphold our commitments to Tribal communities now and for future generations.

As the Ranking Member on this committee, I wholeheartedly oppose these cuts. I cannot stand by and watch this agency be hollowed out.

So, thank you again for being here this morning. I'm sorry that we disagree on the perspective on how this department should be run, and I do hope you are here to give us a rationale for these decisions or to work with us to reverse them.

And I yield back.

**Full Committee Chairman Tom Cole (R-OK):**

Thank you, Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree, for holding this hearing. Secretary Burgum, welcome, and thank you for testifying before the subcommittee on the Trump Administration's budget proposal for the Department of the Interior. This White House has signaled a new chapter for America: one that recognizes that we can both champion productivity and sustainability for the future.

A key part of that vision is an emphasis on real results – not redundant regulations. I support efforts to address inefficiencies and duplications across the federal government. Right-sizing bureaucracy and reducing unnecessary spending are long overdue, and we can uphold these priorities alongside management of national assets. Proper stewardship of our natural, cultural, and environmental resources is a shared objective. This mission will continue to be advanced – while also leveraging innovation and effective governance – to unlock a new era of strength. This includes policies that advance U.S. energy leadership—demonstrating our ability to produce energy resources cleaner, smarter, and safer than anywhere else in the world.

I also appreciate Secretary Burgum's previous work and sentiments in regard to our Tribal nations. You've been clear on the importance of engagement, collaboration, and a sincere willingness to listen – so I will express my concerns on how the proposed budget will impact Indian Country. Our trust and treaty responsibilities are national commitments to be upheld, and debilitating cuts jeopardize these obligations. Tribes already do their best with limited resources, and further reductions in funding for services and self-governance will create even greater challenges.

My voice and legislative work will always reflect my heartfelt commitment to Tribal issues. I look forward to hearing more about where improvements can be made and how the agency plans to uphold these sacred responsibilities. Thank you for being here today, Secretary Burgum. You have an important job – protecting our national parks, conserving our public lands, and promoting domestic energy production. We stand ready to help in any way we can.

**Witnesses**

**The Honorable Doug Burgum**, Secretary, U.S. Department of Interior

[\*Testimony\*](#)

**Q&A**

**Chairman Mike Simpson (R-ID)** said that some of the cuts in the President's proposed skinny budget are cuts that they may not be able to fully replicate in their bill. He asked Secretary Burgum what he would do if Congress decides to provide discretionary spending levels to the agency above the levels in the President's skinny budget. Secretary Burgum answered yes. Chairman Simpson then asked whether



the agency has all of the tools it needs to carry out land exchange processes. Secretary Burgum said that they have a good set of tools today, citing a recent land exchange with the state of Utah that was completed in February. He added that he had never met anyone who cared more about these processes than the people in the states. Chairman Simpson clarified that they do have the authority to do this. Secretary Burgum answered yes. Chairman Simpson said that people in the west love their public lands and want to make sure it remains this way.

**Full Committee Chairman Tom Cole (R-OK)** said that he is glad President Trump appointed Secretary Burgum. He said that he believes the Secretary is “superbly suited” for the job. He said he appreciated his energy background and praised both Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree for their work in this subcommittee. He said that he knows members on both sides of the aisle deeply care about tribal issues. He asked the Secretary if he could talk about the cut to BIE operations of Indian programs and BIE education construction. Secretary Burgum said that there are 125,000 K-12 kids involved in this system and the challenges are greater than the budget. He said that in North Dakota, BIE schools had been getting the highest amount of BIE funding, but had the worst outcomes. Secretary Burgum said that they need to consider other factors besides budget because the amount of money you spend doesn’t always equal the best results. He emphasized that tribal schools often have more resources and better outcomes and that in many cases there should be more collaboration between the two. Chairman Cole agreed with Secretary Burgum’s points. Chairman Cole then asked Secretary Burgum what the timeline was for disaster funding applications, as many communities have been waiting quite a while. He said that in Oklahoma in particular there have been devastating tornadoes and there are communities desperately in need. Secretary Burgum said that they have been working as quickly as possible with OMB and are committed to getting these out the door as fast as they can.

**Chairman Simpson** agreed with the Secretary’s comments about schools, emphasized that they were talking about facilities and had the resources to build the schools the kids needed.

**Ranking Member Chellie Pingree (D-ME)** emphasized the bipartisan focus on restoring funding levels construction for tribal schools. She discussed need to obligate the funding appropriated in the FY25 continuing resolution (CR) and spoke about Maine and other states facing a funding crisis due to the lack of releasing congressionally appropriated funds resulting in negative impacts on several projects. She asked Sec. Burgum if he was aware of the status of the funds. Sec. Burgum stated that they were waiting for the apportionment to come but were working hard to get the funding out. Ranking Member Pingree repeated the Chairmans line of questioning about spending funds if they were appropriated above the levels in the skinny budget, mentioning a provision in the CR that stated amounts appropriated to DOI should be available for expenditures no more than 60 days after the enactment of the act. She noted OMB had not apportioned the funds by the deadline and asked Sec. Burgum if he was pushing OMB to do so. Sec. Burgum explained that he had been in contact with OMB and was pushing. Ranking Member Pingree said that from her perspective if they did not get the funding, that was impoundment and breaking the law and expressed Congress’ frustration at the administration for disregarding their efforts. She noted her expectation that the Secretary would be pushing for the apportionment and to not break the law. Sec. Burgum said he would and emphasized his understanding of the importance of state and federal historical preservation offices.

**Rep. Mark Amodei (R-NV)** discussed the consolidation of federal wildland fire responsibilities and asked Sec. Burgum where they were at with that as the fire season was upon them. Sec. Burgum said he had been working with Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins on the issue, and they were working to build off their successful coordination but were having issues with resource allocations. Sec. Burgum highlighted the challenges of moving the responsibility from one agency to another and said they would



have an announcement of further coordination in the near future. Rep. Amodei spoke about personnel issues with certified land appraisers and certified minerals examiners and the negative impacts of cuts on top of vacancies. He said Sec. Burgum had an opportunity to refocus on the mission of Interior, and the committee was willing to offer support to operate efficiently, but they needed to have people to operate. Sec. Burgum said they were trying to get more people on the front lines and streamline the agency through the restructuring, along with reducing administrative rules to be able to more easily transfer federal lands to states and localities.

**Rep. Josh Harder (D-CA)** said that he hoped that himself and the Secretary could work together to manage the devastating wildfires that have been happening out west. He said that right now the U.S. Forest Service is the only agency with a formal casualty assistance program, meaning thousands of firefighters under the Department of Interior still don't have access to those same benefits. He asked Secretary Burgum if he would support a bill that would establish a casualty assistance program at the Department of Interior. Secretary Burgum said that he needs to read over any bill before supporting it but he totally supports the intention of this. Secretary Burgum said that we have firefighters and law enforcement that need to be supported across various agencies at the Department of Interior, including the Bureau of Land Management. Secretary Burgum said they have implemented a base pay increase for firefighters at the department since he entered office and that he absolutely agrees with the direction that the Congressman is headed. Rep. Harder also discussed how many local firefighting departments are the ones to respond first, which have much smaller budgets. He said that it often takes a very long time for reimbursements to be given to them from agencies like the Department of Interior and Fish and Wildlife Service and said that he has a bill that would streamline this reimbursement process. He asked Secretary Burgum if he would support this bill. Secretary Burgum said yes, but like before, with the caveat of still needing to look over the bill. Rep. Harder said that we need to fix these issues and that he looks forward to working with the Secretary in the future.

**Rep. Jake Ellzey (R-TX)** said that he appreciates that Secretary Burgum has both supported fossil fuels and carbon neutral technologies which is reflected in his experience. He also talked about how Secretary Burgum has been an advocate for onshoring our critical mineral supply chain, reducing dependence on China. He said that both of these things he greatly appreciates. He also thanked Secretary Burgum for sending the North Dakota National Guard down to Texas to secure the border. He said that on the topic of tribes, we have seen many tribes worried about how cuts to the Department of Interior will affect them. He said that in terms of cuts, one of his biggest concerns was the DOI's law enforcement capabilities and asked Secretary Burgum to talk about this. Secretary Burgum said that one of the issues has been that law enforcement capabilities have been limited in tribal areas meaning organized crime has had an easier time operating in these areas, smuggling things like fentanyl. Secretary Burgum talked about some instances that had occurred in North Dakota and emphasized the importance of addressing this issue. He said that he had met with Kash Patel and that the FBI had previously not been meeting with these tribes to address the issue and said that the FBI will be putting more resources towards this. He said that the states are unable to conduct a lot of the enforcement with these tribes and that it is an issue in which the federal government is responsible for handling. Rep. Ellzey concluded his thoughts by saying that these communities also need more air support.

**Chairman Simpson** said the challenges they had with missing and murdered indigenous people was the ratio of officers to land area, along with the need to resolve jurisdictional issues.

**Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN)** spoke about the lack of details on the budget they had and the 35% cut to DOI, which she thought deserved more money. She noted the plans to lay off 35,000 DOI employees and the need to keep public employees where they need to be and providing constituents the services they



want, from park operations to natural resource education, and maintenance of trails and national landmarks. She noted her concerns about the cuts to the U.S. geological survey, emphasizing its importance for the flow of water. Rep. McCollum emphasized the need for historical preservation and concerns about the cuts to tribal funding. She discussed the importance of the Mississippi National Recreation Area (MNRA) and Elon Musk's instructions to GSA to cancel the leasing to the park's operational headquarters and only visitors' center. She said they know that the MNRA facility was no longer on DOGE's list, but she had yet to receive a response to her letter about the cuts. Rep. McCollum asked Sec. Burgum if they could meet to discuss the issue more before any official decisions were made on MNRA's future. Sec. Burgum said they could and that the leases were off the list. Rep. McCollum discussed the efforts to have more parks service interpretation in other locations in MNRA. Sec. Burgum noted his personal connections to MNRA, and said they needed less money for federal office space in general so they could spend money on other things.

**Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-UT)** noted the amount of federal lands and national parks in her district and noted all her questions would have to do with asking the Secretary to work with her to make sure they were doing what was best for Utah. She spoke of the decrease in water usage in Utah asked Sec. Burgum if he was confident that the department's budget would help states like Utah continue to lead out on conservation. Sec. Burgum said that he was committed to working with her and other states with large amounts of public lands and protecting people from overlapping regulations. Rep. Maloy spoke about Utah's water conservation plan to address their rapid population growth and the fact that funding for water conservation disproportionately went to other states. She asked Sec. Burgum to work with her to prioritize projects in Utah. Sec. Burgum said he could not commit to specific projects, but it was exciting that more was on deck. Rep. Maloy discussed concerns from local elected officials on federal land management. She asked Sec. Burgum what his plan was to strengthen the partnerships between federal workers and local elected officials who represent the people who live interconnectedly with federal land. Sec. Burgum said they were trying to bring a focus back to state relationships and building the federal offices to have those connections, but governors were also a great place to start. Rep. Maloy asked if Sec. Burgum would work with them on lease sales to produce energy and he agreed. Rep. Maloy discussed the issue of wild horses and asked Sec. Burgum if he would work with them on finding long term solutions to the problem and he agreed.

**Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT)** began by clarifying whether Secretary Burgum has the authority to execute land exchanges and divesting in tracks of land to alleviate the problems of the checkerboard system. Secretary Burgum affirmed that they do. He said that while he feels they currently have the tools to do so, he is committed to working with Congress in making sure this remains the case. Rep. Zinke said that President Trump issued an executive order to ensure that Secretary Burgum and the Secretary of Agriculture do just that. Secretary Burgum said that the Executive Order was actually directed towards the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to address the issue of housing. Secretary Burgum pointed out that the western states, unlike the east, have much more federal lands that can be used to provide more affordable housing. Rep. Zinke asked Secretary Burgum whether he was committed to ensuring communities surrounded by federal lands were given the proper support for their housing and infrastructure needs. Secretary Burgum said that they are. Rep. Zinke asked Secretary Burgum if he would prioritize Utah and Nevada given that they seem to be in most need of help with this. Secretary Burgum said yes, but he would also include Alaska, Idaho and Wyoming. Rep. Zinke asked the Secretary to describe the process he takes with land transfers. Secretary Burgum answered that he is only 100 days into his term, but the best example he can point to is what Interior has done with Utah. Rep. Zinke expressed his enthusiasm for working with Secretary Burgum in the future.



**Chairman Simpson** said that the President's skinny budget proposes a \$1.2 billion cut for the National Park Service, \$900 million of that towards Operations and Maintenance. He said that the justification for this reduction says that the DOI will shift the responsibility of managing some of these parks to the states. Chairman Simpson asked Secretary Burgum if Congress will be provided a list of the parks which are being considered for this, and whether the Administration has gotten the input of Governors on this proposal. Secretary Burgum said that there is no intention of actually transferring responsibility of any of the 64 national parks to the states. He said that what isn't often known is that there are over 400 other locations that the National Park Service manages, like memorials or old battlefields. He said that this proposal directs Interior to work with Congress to determine whether it makes more sense for states to mention these smaller, less visited locations. Chairman Simpson said that every year he has been in Congress, there have been proposals for the National Park Service to take on more and more sites, and it has gotten to be too much. Chairman Simpson then discussed the Legacy Restoration Fund created under the Great American Outdoors Act. He asked the Secretary whether this should continue to be a priority in addressing deferred maintenance needs. Secretary Burgum answered yes. Chairman Simpson said he wasn't going to dive deeply into firefighting, but he was open to many ideas, and briefly mentioned that he has occasionally questioned whether the U.S. Forest Service should be part of the Department of Interior.

**Ranking Member Pingree** discussed the issues raised by staffing cuts and the reorganization of DOI and her concerns about how that was carried out, expressing her hope that the committee would be more involved in decision-making moving forward. She highlighted a critical position at Acadia National Forest that was now vacant because of the cuts and hiring freeze and Sec. Burgum likened it to an issue at Yosemite and said they would be able to get the position filled. Ranking Member Pingree discussed renewable energy, the Secretary's energy work in North Dakota, the AI arms race with China and the need for more energy. She expressed her belief that the administration was disregarding needed investments in renewable energy and solely focusing on fossil fuels, emphasizing that clean energy would save the average household \$500 annually. She noted cuts to clean energy in the budget and asked Sec. Burgum to justify his perspective. Sec. Burgum said the key component was reliability, specifically the ability to provide for the baseload energy usage and disagreed with Ranking Member Pingree's statements on cost, asserting the high costs of renewables. Sec. Burgum emphasized the benefits of carbon capture and its effectiveness in North Dakota, small modular nuclear reactors, and the need to fix the permitting system in America. Ranking Member Pingree disagreed with several of Sec. Burgum and they both discussed the benefits of rooftop solar for powering homes. She said she would be interested in seeing more carbon capture.

**Full Committee Chairman Cole** highlighted the importance of funding tribes and partnering with tribal governments. He discussed national parks and national recreation areas and the sale of federal lands. He spoke of the need for more information from the administration on the budget. Full Committee Chairman Cole emphasized the need to move forward with the appropriations process to ensure a deal is made by the end of the year, noting President Trump would be very involved in the process.

**Rep. Amodei** began by discussing how he isn't very familiar with federal land transactions as no districts in Nevada have used it to his awareness. He also mentioned that Nevada has struggled in that they don't have much infrastructure for BIA law enforcement. He said BIA wouldn't be paying the local Sheriffs anymore to help out. He then talked about problems between BLM and the Nevada State Engineer on groundwater issues, stating that it was within the jurisdiction of the State Engineer, despite BLM getting involved. Rep. Amodei said that this does bug him and he will be following up on this. He said that there are clearly some administrative issues that need to be worked out with BLM to make the process more efficient. He thanked Secretary Burgum for his work and said he looked forward to continued collaboration.



**Chairman Simpson** thanked the Secretary for coming in and the Secretary said that he wanted to make one more comment. Secretary Burgum said that they have uncovered 48,000 unresolved probate cases in Indian country and houses are sealed, and it has led to a housing crisis in these tribal communities. He said that they have created some strike teams, but they are definitely going to need to get creative to address these issues. Next, he mentioned that there were also compensation issues in regard to mineral rights. He said some individuals with mineral rights have gone through the entire shale revolution without ever receiving a check. He said that it has been so long for some that now they are having to look for relatives, and the money is held in suspension by either the government or the mining companies. Chairman Simpson reiterated his appreciation for the Secretary's testimony and said he looked forward to working with him on these issues.

*The hearing was adjourned.*