



FROM: Kountoupes Denham Carr & Reid

DATE: Wednesday, May 21, 2025

RE: Senate Appropriations Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee Hearing to examine proposed budget estimates for fiscal year 2026 for the Department of the Interior

Topline Summary

- Members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies convened to discuss the Department of Interior's FY 2026 Budget with Secretary Doug Burgum
- Republicans pushed for less bureaucracy, more efficient spending, and stronger support for domestic energy and resource development. Chairwoman Murkowski emphasized Alaska's resource potential and raised concerns about cuts to mineral mapping. Senators Hoeven and Rounds backed Secretary Burgum's cost-cutting approach and called for better tribal law enforcement. Sen. Mullin warned about U.S. reliance on China for minerals and pushed for more domestic mining.
- Democrats opposed budget and staff cuts, expressing concerns over how they would hurt parks, conservation, and tribal services. Ranking Member Merkley and Full Committee Ranking Member Murray criticized delays in funding and reductions to park staffing and firefighting. Others, like Senators Van Hollen, Heinrich, Baldwin, and Ossoff, raised concerns about environmental programs, education funding, and support for local communities.

Senators Attending: Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Ranking Member Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Full Committee Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA), Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND), Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE), Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK), Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SD), Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-GA)

[Live Hearing Link](#)

Meeting called to order by Chairwoman Murkowski

Opening Statements

Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK):

I'm pleased to have the opportunity today to talk about the important work that the Department does, including its leading role in supporting America's energy agenda, empowering Indian country and tribal nations, providing recreational opportunities to tens of millions of Americans and generating billions of dollars in economic output. It's been a real pleasure. I've appreciated the meetings that we've had the conversations that we've had by phone, and it's been great to meet the various Assistant Secretary nominees from the Department. I've enjoyed our conversations there, I'm impressed by their understanding of the issues that they focus on and their commitment to public service.



You're building out quite the team. It was great to be able to talk to Kate McGregor. She has a little bit of history with the Department and comes with a lot of knowledge and understanding. And certainly on Alaska related issues.

So we're eager to get her confirmed and to work, as well as some of their nominees. We're still waiting for some of the key ones as the Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, where we're anxious to have a nominee for the Bureau of Indian Affairs as well. So I want to thank you. I want to thank you.

I want to thank President Trump for recognizing Alaska's amazing natural resource potential. This was very significant in the day one Executive Order, everything from the Ambler Road to the NPRA, or non-wilderness, coastal plain Alaska LNG, but there's been very swift, very early and decisive action in this space. And it's welcome, both here in Washington, DC and certainly in my state. So I'm looking forward to working with you to further facilitate the development of Alaska's resources.

I know you are looking forward to going to Alaska in just a couple of weeks. Hopefully, it's going to be a great trip, lots of good information, good feedback and good weather. And I'm hopeful that Denali will be out in all of its majesty and splendor, and you'll be reminded why Alaskans prefer the Koyuk Athabasca name, Denali, meaning the great one. The President, you have set out an ambitious agenda, particularly with respect to the focus on energy and economic development, very supportive of this endeavor, and know that I want to be your partner in achieving so many of the goals.

But beyond the actual Resource Development, the Department of Interior can be an economic force for good and in many different ways. And one of the most important economic drivers that we see up in Alaska, aside from the resource end of things is within the Department within the national parks system. National Parks is the home states have the members on this Subcommittee, and generates a collective \$7.4 billion of economic output annually. That's more than the gross domestic product of 40 different countries.

But it's not just the economic output that makes parks so important. It's the experiences of traveling to park seeing the wildlife having an adventure that creates a lifetime of memories. And we've had discussions about some of your early years and the significance of that. Back home and Alaska, we've already had about 150,000 people come through on cruise ships this year.

That might not surprise other people. But this is early for us. We estimate a total of 1.6 5 million visitors for the tourism season. That's about double the population of our state.

So when we see a skinny budget that proposes to cut 1.2 billion or 35% from Park Service, it's hard to square it with the claims that DOI is focused on fostering the American economy again, recognizing that our economy is more than just our natural resource development. Another area of concern that I will address in my questions within the National Park Service budget proposal is the concept of turning over management of national parks to the states. I'm trying to figure out exactly how this would work. And I'm kind of thinking it's like me putting my kids in charge of the upkeep for the House that I own.

In some instances, it might make good sense. But as a wholesale best practice, I worry about how that might impact the parks or people. So should this concept be included in the full budget request, I'd hope that we have a really thorough conversation with you to better understand the justification for the proposal. I am concerned about what the skinny budget proposes for the BIA and the BIE.



Cutting nearly \$1 billion from Indian Affairs would hurt the federal government's ability to meet its trust responsibility to Native people. And in some of our conversations, I've shared some of the areas where I think the Department has failed Indian country. And this is in areas like probate where we have an extraordinary backlog, Public Safety and Justice missing and murdered indigenous people as well as the education of Native American children. And while I appreciate that the skinny budget alleges that proposed cuts would enable tribes to focus to focus on law enforcement.

I'm not sure how reducing BIA law enforcement funding by 107 million is treating the program as a core priority of tribes. I know because I hear it tribes have been requesting more support for this program to address a serious lack of policing. So I worried that cuts of this magnitude can't be made up for by directing tribes to apply for grants at DOJ. As the as the skinny budget suggests, I want to end my opening comments this morning by talking about what I consider to be and I know that you put equal priority to and that's the men and women of the Department, the people who actually make things happen.

We've talked about a lot of good ideas for using new systems, IT systems artificial intelligence, how we can make the Department more efficient. And these are good goals worthy goals. And I hope to see that detailed more in the budget. But I think we know when we're talking about management of our public lands, if you don't have the necessary staff, whether out in the field or in the headquarters, all the investments that we want to make become less efficient.

When I think about the executive order as it relates specifically to Alaska. We've got some good things that we want to do up north when it comes to resource development, with scientific and ecological assessments that are provided by USGS are relied upon by not just federal land management agencies by the but by the industry as well. So USGS science helps avoid polar debt, polar bear dens, identify permafrost map caribou migration patterns.

It causes me to wonder are we going to be able to accomplish what we're all seeking to accomplish together? I think it's important, also that people have expertise and knowledge about the places that they serve. You, I had this conversation with folks in that Forest Service. You just can't take somebody who maybe comes from Indianapolis, good Forest Service person, but you put them out at the Mendenhall Glacier visitors center where their job is bear management, they don't have a clue about bear management.

We want to make sure that we're making good and smart decisions. I know you're probably gonna get a lot of questions today about staffing, cuts and how that is going to impact the operations of the Department, not just here in Washington but around the country. I do wish that the Acting Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget, Mr. Hasson is not here today to answer some of these questions because it he seems to be in charge of making a lot of the decisions about the staffing and the reorg. I'm hoping that he is going to be in a position to be more responsive to my staff about some of the questions that we have raised.

But ultimately, and you know, you've been a governor, you know, the buck stops with you. He can be responsible for certain things, but ultimately, it is it's you that are accountable. So getting the answers to questions about the reorganizations, the impacts of rifts, how the Department will operate national parks, protect reserves, and implement the President's energy agenda. So getting this channel of communication going back and forth in a good and a constructive way I think is going to be important, but my bottom line to you this morning is I'm pleased with your nomination.



I'm excited that you are there at the Department I'm really excited about the shift that we're seeing in Alaska where the Department has really gone from being a problem to being a partner in so many different areas. So looking forward to what we're going to be able to do together. With that I'll turn to Senator Merkley.

Ranking Member Jeff Merkley (D-OR):

Well, thank you very much Chair Murkowski and welcome Secretary Burgum. Mr. Secretary, I am just astonished and not in a good way, by all we have seen over the last four months at the Interior Department. Coming into this second Trump Administration, I feared that interior would open up more lands to drilling and mining, deepening our addiction to fossil fuels, and ignoring the growing impact of climate chaos. And of course, that chaos has huge consequences for the health of our public lands.

And that fear was justified, despite the US operating at an all-time high for energy production, and more than 19 million leased acres sitting idle across the country. That's 46% of the onshore acres and nice 79% of the offshore acres. Yet the administration lied to the American people and declared a bogus energy emergency. And now you're expediting fossil fuel permitting and dropping protections for vast swaths of public lands while restricting renewable energy production.

You don't have an all the above energy policy, you have a fossils above all policy, and one that hurts our future. I also feared that a second Trump Administration would undermine the Endangered Species Act in order to pave the way for industry and developers to not have to be bothered by protecting species on the brink of extinction or the health of their ecosystems. And right on time, the Department proposed a change to the Endangered Species Act, declaring that habitat destruction doesn't count when it comes to harming species. But Mr. Secretary, I never expected to see not even for a second, an administration that would fire or push out under threat.

Hundreds of dedicated public lands employees, including firefighters and park rangers who keep us safe and protect our national treasures. I never expected to see an administration openly proposed to offload vast numbers of national park sites onto the state's fracturing our treasured system with an eye on profit, rather than preserving our collective heritage. I never expected to see an administration brazenly violate bipartisan congressional direction, written into law by holding back funds for state and Tribal Historic Preservation offices, national heritage areas, international anti-poaching groups and volunteer territorial groups. I never expect to see an administration that would callously propose to forsake our treaty and trust responsibilities to sovereign tribal nations.

In your confirmation hearing, you said how proud you were as governor the strong partnership you had with tribes in North Dakota. We don't have to wonder what tribes think today about your proposal to cut corps tribal programs for road maintenance, Republic safety for social services, and other vital services nearly in half, or cut tribal school administration by 80%. In a system with a \$1 billion in deferred maintenance, and dozens of schools in desperate condition.

A broad coalition of organizations from across Indian country serving tribal nationals and tribal citizens sent you a letter on April 11, calling these cuts absolutely unacceptable, and that they quote undermine the sacred promises made by the United States to tribal nations. Madam Chair, I'd like to submit that letter for the record without objection.

I never expect to see it administration delay funding for wildfire preparedness and fire red card employees who are trained to fight wildfires are trial and error and smoke monetary and national parks is winter wildfire season. And here we are on the brink of another fire season.



You have left us less prepared. safeguarding your species and ecosystems preserving public lands supporting tribal nations protected against wildfires are fundamental responsibilities of the Department. For the Trump Administration, however, it's clear that none of that is sacred. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said there is nothing so American as our national parks the country belongs to the people.

And environmentalists and novelist Wallace stringer said national parks are the best idea we ever had. If creating the national park system was the best idea we've had. this administration's assault on the national park system is one of the worst. Parks binds us together as a nation.

They are shared natural wonders open to all parks preserve and show us our shared history place. Here's where we can take pride in what happened there and places where we can learn how to live up to our ideals. Congress created nearly every national park site by law, not just our crown jewels. But each of the parks sites, including sites that aren't part of the capital N capital P system like the Oregon case system in Oregon.

They all deserve recognition. Each location is special and part of our national story. But this administration wants to strip down the national park system and hand out the parts. Mr. Secretary, you'd like to talk about unleashing America's balance sheet focusing on the mining and exploitation profit potential of our public lands.

But accounting for the value of public lands is not as simple as a business spreadsheet. How do you value recharging one soul on the rim of the Grand Canyon? How do you measure the value of a fourth grader gasping and awe at the unspoiled natural wonder of Crater Lake in Oregon. Rob an adult who watch civil rights marches on TV and 60s Walking cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama and reliving the fight for racial equality and remembering Bloody Sunday 1965.

This administration talks about public lands like they're just a transaction available for wheeling trade or for sale. But they are not just a transaction. They are part of the soul of this nation. They are to be celebrated, protected and passed on to the next generation and the generation after our national parks cites our national wildlife refuges.

Our National Landscape Conservation System belongs to the American people, they are not for sale. So today, I'll try to dive deeper into the shocking strategy of selling off America's Treasures, destroying endangered species and ecosystems walking away from our responsibility to tribes and the effort to fire dedicated professional federal workers and to freeze funding for parks, nonprofits and most dangerously wildfire preparedness. I look forward to the discussion.

Witnesses

The Honorable Doug Burgum, Secretary, Department of Interior

[Testimony](#)

Q&A

Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) emphasized the need for regular, transparent communication between the Department of the Interior and Congressional staff, requesting quarterly meetings to support oversight amid departmental restructuring. Secretary Doug Burgum agreed and highlighted leadership appointments, including Kate McGregor's upcoming start. Chairwoman Murkowski praised the



administration's support for Alaska's resource potential and asked for updates on implementing related executive orders. In response, Sec. Burgum described deep systemic inefficiencies, outdated IT systems, and unclear staffing structures within the Department. He argued for reallocating resources from overhead to frontline roles, like park staff and firefighters, to boost effectiveness and deliver on shared policy goals.

Ranking Member Jeff Merkley (D-OR) expressed concern to Secretary Doug Burgum on a proposal to cut \$900 million from the National Park System by potentially offloading some of the 370 non-"Crown Jewel" sites, including ones in Oregon. Ranking Member Merkley emphasized that most of these sites were established by law and would require Congressional action to be removed—raising concerns about executive overreach. Sec. Burgum clarified that this was only a proposal for the FY 2026 budget and committed to providing a site list when available. Ranking Member Merkley also criticized the Department's lack of responsiveness to repeated funding inquiries, including delays in disbursing legally obligated conservation funds and missing deadlines for lists required under the Great American Outdoors Act. Sec. Burgum pledged to improve communication, provide overdue information, and ensure funding is distributed based on merit, not political bias.

Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND) highlighted Secretary Burgum's background as a businessman and former governor, emphasizing his record of improving services while cutting costs through modern management systems. Sec. Burgum detailed how he reduced North Dakota's general fund by \$1.7 billion without disrupting services and stressed the potential to bring similar efficiencies to the Department of the Interior, noting the agency's outdated and redundant systems. They also discussed the urgent need to expand training for BIA law enforcement at North Dakota's Camp Grafton and Sec. Burgum expressed full support. Sen. Hoeven further raised bipartisan legislation to maintain a wild horse herd in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, which Sec. Burgum endorsed. Finally, they denounced the Biden administration's public lands rule, with Sec. Burgum calling it "irresponsible," arguing it restricts essential energy and resource development and weakens national security by removing valuable federal land from productive use.

Full Committee Ranking Member Patty Murry (D-WA) expressed concern with Secretary Burgum on the impacts of his proposed budget and staffing cuts, noting the 18% decrease in National Park Service personnel, including critical roles like park rangers and even the sole plumber at Mount Rainier. She argued that support staff are essential to safe, efficient park operations and warned that the cuts appear to compromise the Department's legal conservation obligations. Sec. Burgum defended the restructuring as a way to reduce administrative overhead while increasing on-the-ground staffing, though Ranking Member Murray remained skeptical. She also challenged Sec. Burgum's handling of wildland firefighting and tribal support, raising alarms over budget cuts to BIA law enforcement and social services. Sec. Burgum assured her of his commitment to wildland firefighting readiness and cited ongoing tribal consultations, promising to provide a full list of tribes he's met with.

Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SD) raised concerns to Secretary Burgum about critical staffing shortages in tribal law enforcement, particularly in the Great Plains where just a handful of officers patrol vast areas. He advocated for more accessible, regional training options to reduce barriers for recruits, such as utilizing facilities like the South Dakota Law Enforcement Training Center. Sec. Burgum expressed full support, citing successful collaboration on advanced training programs and openness to expanding basic training in the region. Sen. Rounds also proposed creating a cross-jurisdictional commission involving the Departments of Interior and Justice to tackle violent crime on reservations—where rates are up to five times the national average—which Sec. Burgum agreed could be highly effective. Lastly, Sen. Rounds



addressed recurring minor fenceline disputes between landowners and federal agencies, emphasizing that these should be resolved through local mediation rather than legal battles. Sec. Burgum agreed to look into establishing or enhancing a mediation framework, noting the practicality of resolving such issues on the ground.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) highlighted the Department of the Interior's critical role in preserving the Chesapeake Bay and supporting Maryland's environmental and economic interests. He emphasized that the Bay's health is vital to industries such as fishing, tourism, and boating, and noted the importance of federal programs like the WILD grants, the U.S. Geological Survey's scientific research, national wildlife refuges, and heritage sites. Sen. Van Hollen expressed concern over proposed budget cuts in the Department's skinny budget, warning they could jeopardize these essential programs. He sought Secretary Burgum's commitment to maintain both the partnership and the necessary funding. Sec. Burgum assured the senator of his willingness to work collaboratively with Maryland's delegation to sustain these efforts.

Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) expressed concerns over the Department of the Interior's nearly 50% budget increase since 2021, despite unchanged duties. Secretary Burgum agreed there's room to cut overhead without harming programs. Sen. Mullin also raised concerns about U.S. dependence on China for critical minerals and emphasized the potential of domestic resources, especially on tribal lands, to boost national security and tribal economies. Sec. Burgum warned of overregulation and foreign market manipulation that have crippled U.S. mining. They also discussed the fallout from the McGirt Supreme Court ruling, which has created major law enforcement challenges in Oklahoma. Sec. Burgum acknowledged its complexity and welcomed further briefings.

Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) urged Secretary Burgum to avoid downplaying the importance of smaller or lesser-known National Park Service sites, like New Mexico's Valles Caldera National Preserve, emphasizing their cultural and recreational value. Sec. Burgum assured him that no decisions had been made and that consultation would guide any changes. Sen. Heinrich also raised concerns over a proposed \$187 million (79%) cut to Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school construction, stressing the urgency of addressing a \$4 billion backlog. Sec. Burgum acknowledged the systemic issues but emphasized improving educational outcomes. Sen. Heinrich secured Sec. Burgum's continued commitment to consult local communities before altering New Mexico monument designations.

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) expressed concern over workforce cuts and frozen funds that have left Wisconsin's North Country and Ice Age National Scenic Trails critically understaffed and underfunded, requesting an update on staffing and maintenance—something Secretary Burgum said he would follow up on. Sen. Baldwin also highlighted the importance of the USGS Biological Resources Division, noting recent layoffs of about 100 staff in Wisconsin who study critical issues like invasive carp, habitat restoration, PFAS contamination, and wildlife disease prevention. She asked Sec. Burgum for a commitment to reverse budget cuts targeting this division, emphasizing its vital role in protecting natural resources and public health. Sec. Burgum declined to commit immediately, citing budgetary constraints amid broader federal spending concerns but acknowledged the importance of these priorities.

Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-GA) urged Secretary Burgum to support the bipartisan effort to secure UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for Georgia's Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and requested continued support for the bipartisan effort to establish Georgia's first National Park—the ACC Mogi National Park and Preserve. Sec. Burgum agreed to look into these requests.



Chairwoman Murkowski raised concerns about a nearly 40% proposed budget cut to the USGS, stressing the importance of programs like Earth MRI that help map mineral reserves and better understand public land assets. Secretary Burgum agreed that such cuts need careful evaluation to ensure value is created. He clarified that none of the 63 official national parks—including those in Alaska—are planned for transfer to state control, only some low-visitation historic or cultural sites might be.

Ranking Member Merkley raised concerns about the Interior Department's FY 25 spending plan, saying it only includes details for a small part of the budget, leaving most programs unsure if they'll get funding. Secretary Burgum explained that outdated budgeting systems and delays from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) are holding things up. Ranking Member Merkley urged Sec. Burgum to push OMB to release funds quickly so projects can continue smoothly. While Sec. Burgum said knowing this year's spending helps plan next year's budget, the Ranking Member stressed that without timely funding, it's hard to measure progress.

The hearing was adjourned.