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CHIEF OF STAFF

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of

Chairman Doc Hastings

Committee on Natural Resources

On Thursday, January 16, 2014

1324 Longworth House Office Building

Full Committee Business Meeting to Authorize the Issuance of Subpoenas

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From day one as Chairman of this Committee I've made oversight of the Executive Branch a top priority. Congress has a responsibility to the American people to hold the White House and the Executive Branch departments and agencies accountable, and to ask fair and thoughtful questions about their actions and decisions.

There are several matters on which this Committee has been conducting oversight – some of them for years. They include, but are not limited to, the rewrite of the Stream Buffer Zone Rule, the decision to retroactively sequester Secure Rural Schools funds, implementation and enforcement of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, closed-door Endangered Species Act settlement agreements, and conflicts of interests by current and former Interior Department employees affecting how federal lands are being managed.

On all of these investigations we've faced a lack of cooperation from the Obama Administration. Requests for information go unanswered or are delayed for months, documents are withheld in their entirety or heavily redacted, and there's a refusal to make witnesses available for questioning.

We've been extremely patient over the past year and have given the new Interior Secretary a chance to get up to speed. The Secretary has expressed a willingness to work with me directly to resolve some of our oversight requests, and I'm certainly willing to do so. Yet requests for specific documents remain incomplete. Requests to speak to specific officials have not been met. Many months have passed and the Department has yet to provide full, transparent responses.

I've sought to be patient. We've asked nicely. We've ask repeatedly. And as patience wears thin, we learn lessons.

As one, very telling example... At our hearing this week, a witness from the USDA admitted that he wasn't directed to begin immediately collecting documents to response to our oversight request and didn't recall taking any action to respond until after subpoenas were issued. The initial document request was made in May 2013, the subpoenas weren't issued until September. So for four months, the USDA simply ignored our requests for information.

It's very disappointing and frustrating, but it appears the only way to get full, transparent answers out of this Administration may be to issue subpoenas.

I'd like to remind everyone that the motion we will vote on today would simply grant me the authority to issue subpoenas in four specific areas. If the Administration will decide to fully cooperate, then I would be happy to never issue subpoenas. I remain hopeful that they will do so.

Subpoenas are not the preferred option, and I don't want to be forced to have to compel testimony and information from the Administration. But if this is the path the Administration chooses to take, if they refuse to be transparent about their actions and decisions, then we will be left with no other choice.

Foot dragging and delay tactics simply consume unnecessary time and resources. The goal is full, transparent answers – then matters can be concluded. The sooner full responses are produced, the sooner this can end.

This Committee is committed to getting answers and will do what is necessary to ensure that we get them in a timely manner going forward.