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U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

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Opening Statement of

Chairman John Fleming

Subcommittee on Water, Power, and Oceans

On Thursday, March 19, 2015

1334 Longworth House Office Building

Oversight Hearing on "Examining the Spending Priorities and Missions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the President's FY 2016 Budget Proposal."

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Good morning. Today, the Water, Power and Oceans Subcommittee holds its first hearing of this Congress with the Federal Lands Subcommittee to examine the Fiscal Year 2016 budget requests for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Today's hearing begins this Subcommittee's march towards ensuring fisheries abundance and access, seafood safety and availability, and the need for federal transparency of data used in making fisheries management and endangered species decisions. These are just some of the issues we will focus on over the next two years to ensure that the agencies before us reflect the economic, environmental and societal needs of the 21st century.

My home state of Louisiana is tremendously impacted by these two agencies and the laws that govern them. From the farmers who make a living off the fields to the fishermen who harvest the ocean's and rivers bounties, every-day society is impacted by these agencies. The Fish and Wildlife Service, for example, operates sports-fishery hatcheries in our region and that agency will make very important decisions on listing potentially endangered species impacting our lands, bodies of water and way of life. The agency's priorities and lack of transparency have been hit by its endangered species mega-settlements with the Center of Biological Diversity and the WildEarth Guardians, who are still using taxpayer-financed attorneys' fees to sue the federal government. In fact, there are numerous questions over the data used in the potential listing of 404 species that could be listed as endangered or threatened in the southeastern United States because of these settlements.

As many of you know, NOAA has been under fire for some time about its collection and dissemination of Gulf fisheries data, including the red snapper. While most everyone in the Gulf region acknowledges that NOAA's data fails to reflect the red snapper reality, the agency continues to trend of tremendous growth on non-fisheries priorities and central bureaucracy. For example, roughly 8.5% of NOAA's entire proposed budget is steered towards a new satellite and a new survey vessel while there are modest increases for fisheries data collections. Over the past two years, the agency has increased its roster by almost 1,000 employees (or 7.7%). Tim and again, regions are left wondering why the

agency has rapidly increased its inside-the-Beltway operations with mid-level bureaucrats while on-the-ground efforts seem to be a lesser priority.

At the same time, there are contradictions between how both agencies carry out the same laws. In one case, the Fish and Wildlife Service treats certain seafood import inspection requirements differently than NOAA. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, which may have prompted our current President to propose combining parts of the agencies.

The agencies before us today have important missions and legacies to carry out on behalf of the American people. These are no easy tasks when American taxpayers and future generations are facing a mountain of growing debt. We have a duty to carry out proper oversight of these agencies priorities to ensure accountability and prioritization with limited dollars. This hearing will be the first of many oversight and legislative initiatives over the next two years designed to update and modernize these agencies. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle on these endeavors.

In conclusion, I want to thank both Dr. Sullivan and Mr. Ashe for being here today.