

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on the 160th Anniversary of the Department of the Interior

March 3, 2009

Thank you very much. Please have a seat. Thank you, Ken—thank you, Mr. Secretary. It is my honor to join you and the hard-working public servants here at the Department of the Interior as we mark a milestone in the distinguished history of this Department.

As Ken mentioned, 160 years ago today, with the tally of a contentious vote, amidst growing tensions between North and South, as our Nation expanded westward, a deeply divided Senate passed the bill that created the Department of the Interior.

The Department was born less of a singular purpose than of a multitude of needs; it was founded to serve a growing nation whose roles and responsibilities were growing as well. The Department even earned a nickname: "The Department of Everything Else." [*Laughter*]

Yet, throughout our history, as Interior has performed a set of ever-changing and often unrelated duties, an overarching mission has emerged: to defend the natural bounty of this country and the welfare of its people. As Secretary Salazar has said, you have become the "Department of America."

For the services you provide touch the lives of all Americans, from the clean water we drink to the clean energy we must generate; from historic monuments and museums that educate and inspire to the vast wilderness that each new generation can discover and explore. You manage 500 million acres of land, or roughly one-fifth of the area of the United States, and 1.7 billion acres offshore.

It was under this Department—it was this Department under President Teddy Roosevelt that helped lead an unprecedented effort to protect our natural resources. It was under this Department, under President Franklin Roosevelt, that Secretary Harold Ickes supervised the Civilian Conservation Corps to help us overcome the Great Depression.

And your mission is more important than ever before. The Interior Department manages the land on which 30 percent of the Nation's energy is produced. So you have a major role to play, all of you, in our clean energy future. The Nation is depending on you to help us end the tyranny of foreign oil and become energy independent by harnessing the wind and the sun, our water, our soil, and American innovation.

That's why I'm proud to join you this afternoon. That's why I am pleased that this Department is in the capable hands of my great friend Ken Salazar. And that is why the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act creates jobs by making historic investments in the Department of the Interior.

This plan will provide more than \$3 billion to the Department to create jobs doing the work that America needs you to do. It will create jobs increasing our capacity to generate renewable energy on public lands and retrofitting facilities to be far more energy efficient. It will provide for the renovation of laboratories and the replacement of research equipment that in some cases is half a century old.

We'll fund the long-delayed work to preserve our natural wonders and historic landmarks, from Yellowstone National Park to the Statue of Liberty. And we will invest in the roads on which 275 million visitors travel to reach these sites across our country.

We'll provide clean, reliable drinking water to rural areas, promote water conservation, repair aging water infrastructure.

And the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act will rebuild and remodel schools on Indian reservations across this country, while providing more than \$100 million in loans to spur job creation in the Indian economy.

Under the leadership of Secretary Salazar, these investments will be made with unprecedented oversight. In the past, as all of you know, we've seen lapses that have damaged the reputation of this Department, despite the integrity and faithful service of the vast majority of people who work here. In just these first 5 weeks, Secretary Salazar has helped bring about a new era of responsibility and accountability. It is in this spirit that my recovery plan is being implemented.

Finally, today I've signed a memorandum that will help restore the scientific process to its rightful place at the heart of the Endangered Species Act, a process undermined by past administrations. The work of scientists and experts in my administration, including right here in the Interior Department, will be respected. For more than three decades, the Endangered Species Act has successfully protected our Nation's most threatened wildlife, and we should be looking for ways to improve it, not weaken it.

Throughout our history, there's been a tension between those who've sought to conserve our natural resources for the benefit of future generations, and those who have sought to profit from these resources. But I'm here to tell you this is a false choice. With smart, sustainable policies, we can grow our economy today and preserve the environment for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren. That is what we must do.

For you know, you know that our long-term prosperity depends upon the faithful stewardship of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land that we sow. That's a sacred trust, the importance of which cannot be measured merely by the acres we protect, the miles of rivers we preserve, the energy we draw from public lands.

It's a child wandering amidst ancient redwoods, a love for science stirred as she looks skyward. It's a young man running his hand along the walls at Ellis Island, where his grandmother once carried her every possession and the hope of a new life. It's a family hiking along canyons carved by ancient floods, or mountains shaped by shifting continents, finding peace in the beauty of the natural world. These are experiences that enrich our lives and remind us of the blessings that we share.

And that was certainly the case for me. As many of you know, I spent much of my childhood in Hawaii, a place of extraordinary beauty and—[*applause*]*—*we've got a Hawaiian in there—[*laughter*]*—*a place of extraordinary beauty, and one that's home to several national parks and historic sites. But before my 11th birthday, my grandmother decided it was time for me to see the mainland.

So my grandmother, my mother, my sister and I all flew to Seattle. And we drove down the coast along the coast of California, and then east to the Grand Canyon. We headed across the Great Plains and to the Great Lakes, before heading back West through Yellowstone.

That was an experience I will never forget. It's an experience I want for my daughters, and for all of our daughters and sons, to see the incredible beauty of this Nation. It's an experience that's only possible because of the work you do each and every day.

So thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:13 p.m. at the Interior Department. In his remarks, he referred to his sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng.

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