



Committee: Full Senate Environment & Public Works Committee
Event: [Full Committee Hearing on the Nomination of Kevin Lilly to be Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife of the U.S. Department of the Interior](#)
Date: June 24, 2026

Executive Summary:

The Senate Environment & Public Works Committee held a hearing on June 24, 2026, to evaluate **Kevin Lilly's** nomination to be the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks at the Department of the Interior (DOI). Democrats expressed concerns about Lilly's experience, cuts to department budgets and staff, and the lack of authorized funds being disbursed. However, there was bipartisan support expressed for habitat and species conservation efforts.

Member Toplines:

[Chair Shelley Moore Capito \(R-WV\)](#): Capito expressed her support for Lilly based on his decades of leadership experience in the private sector and his year as Acting Assistant Secretary. She voiced her displeasure with the federal permitting process and emphasized the importance of balancing environmental protection with infrastructure development.

*Ranking Member Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)*¹: Whitehouse criticized the significant staffing cuts across the DOI. He also criticized DOI for undermining offshore wind development by arguing such developments harm the North Atlantic right whale while seeking to exempt oil and gas development from *Endangered Species Act* (ESA) restrictions in the Gulf of Mexico, which is the only habitat of the endangered Rice's whale. He questioned Lilly's lack of "specialized experience."

Witness Toplines:

[Kevin Lilly, Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Nominee](#): Lilly emphasized three main priorities: keeping the National Park Service (NPS) properly staffed; supporting the Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) in sustaining healthy habitats; and confronting the deferred-maintenance backlog. He stated his commitment to working with state, tribal, local partners, and gateway communities to advance both conservation and access.

Major Takeaways:

Reforming the ESA:

- Chair Capito highlighted the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia's recent decision to vacate the 2020 Biological Opinion regarding ESA consultations for coal

¹ Written testimony was not available for Ranking Member Sheldon Whitehouse at the time of this memo's distribution.

mining activities. She asked Lilly for his commitment to finding a path forward that would allow efficient ESA consultations. Lilly pledged his commitment.

- Capito stressed the importance of permitting reform, including for the ESA. She asked Lilly how he would reform ESA.
 - Lilly pointed to judicial review reform as a priority for ESA reform. He said that the law should be reasonable, not just a tool to block development or access.

DOI Appropriations:

- Sen. **Jeff Merkley** (D-OR) expressed concern over the Trump administration's failures to execute congressionally authorized and funded programs, especially with respect to international organizations.
 - Lilly replied that he will work to ensure that the appropriate funds are disbursed.

Waterways:

- Merkley noted the Klamath Basin and other waterways require a continued effort to balance the needs of ranchers and farmers, while protecting the species in the Klamath River. He asked Lilly to support addressing multiple needs and examining avenues for collaboration.
 - Lilly replied that, if confirmed, he will work with Merkley and FWS Director **Brian Nesvik** on water rights and irrigation.