

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT,
AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

HEARINGS

BEFORE A

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

ON

H.R. 4754/S. 2431

AN ACT MAKING APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THE IN-
TERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES FOR THE FISCAL
YEAR ENDING SEPTEMBER 30, 2026, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

**Environmental Protection Agency
Department of the Interior
United States Forest Service**

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:33 a.m. in Room SD-124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Lisa Murkowski (chairwoman) presiding.

Present: Senators Murkowski, Capito, Hoeven, Fischer, Rounds, Merkley, Murray, Van Hollen, Baldwin, and Ossoff.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

STATEMENT OF HON. LEE ZELDIN, ADMINISTRATOR

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good morning. The committee will come to order.

I would like to welcome Administrator Zeldin to the committee here this morning. I think it is important, auspicious, that as we begin our budget hearings, we begin the oversight through the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee with the EPA. An area of interest, I think, for all of us as we think about how we ensure that Americans, from Alaska, to Oregon, to New York, to all the places in between, have the benefits of clean air, clean water for all of us. So thank you, Administrator, for being here to discuss the fiscal year 2026 Budget Request.

We recognize that what we have seen is “skinny”, as we refer to it around here. Each year, the subcommittee holds a hearing to examine the EPA budget requests. Some years the budget is the focus of the hearing, and others it is Agency actions that draw the majority of the questions. I think it is probably safe to assume that this year it is going to be a mixture of both of these.

And again, we have just seen the skinny outline of fiscal year 2026. We have yet to see the full details of the President’s Budget Request. But I have to just sum my comments at the outset in saying that looking at some of these proposed cuts, I am looking at them and questioning whether they are serious cuts. I find many of them problematic. And so I am just going to be open and honest with my words here this morning. And we will have good dialogue, constructive dialogue, in this committee.

So again, while we are waiting for additional details, I want to spend my time this morning talking about the vision for the EPA, and Administrator, how you plan to use your position to continue to better provide clean air, water, and land for Americans from Alaska, to Florida, from California, to Maine, and how a budget like the one that you have proposed could support that mission.

Under the Biden administration, I had some very serious concerns about the regulatory overreach of the Agency. I expressed them often. I also shared the concerns that I felt were overzealous enforcement actions coming out of the Agency that went contrary to the needs of Alaskans. We were able to figure out how to find common ground in certain areas to make progress on some things that were certainly good for Alaska.

I mentioned to you contaminated lands, residential wood stove, testing and certification. We still have a long, long way to go on PM 2.5. I think we know that. PFAS 301(h) waivers, we have got work to do. I think we know that.

So now we are in a new administration, new administrator, and perhaps a different direction here. I do appreciate many of the actions and the initiatives that we have had a chance to discuss. Certainly, support the willingness to work with the Army Corps of Engineers to review the WOTUS Rule, your reconsideration of Clean Power Plan 2.0, the Vehicle Emissions Rules, and then, of course, a renewed focus on permitting, something I would think that all of us can come together on.

But my concern this morning, and what you will hear from me and I think many others, is the approach that has been taken with regards to freezing funds, canceling grants, and then the reorganization of the Agency. I am looking at it not only through the lens of Alaskans, but really all Americans, who, regardless of how you feel about the EPA, we benefit from its data-driven decision-making, the remediation efforts, and the mission to protect human health and the environment.

And I respect, I give a lot of leeway for an incoming administration's prerogative to implement changes in support of the policies and priorities, but it also has to be done with clear articulation of the goals against which such changes will be measured. So it is problematic when, as a committee, we are asking questions and we don't receive basic data that would be helpful, would be good guidance for us.

And So when we see implementation of significant changes without working or seriously communicating with us, your partners in Congress, it just makes it harder for us to do the job of supporting your mission. We are on the same side here, and so we want to work with you in so many of these areas.

I think we all can agree that there are inefficiencies and redundancies to be found throughout the Federal Government. Some of EPA's programs, we know, are overly burdensome. And again, I applaud the Administration for seeking to find ways to help ordinary Americans cut through red tape and make programs easier to access. But the seemingly indiscriminate freezing of EPA funding, regardless of source, has caused some significant anxiety from the folks that I am talking to in Alaska.

One example is the Community Change Grants. In my state, we have received 150 million from this program. It is communities like the little Village of Kipnuk, it is the Native Village of Kotzebue. It took a lot of work to get to the place where they were able to secure the funding, and they have had their grants canceled by the Agency without any explanation. And so this is where some of the anxiety comes; it is just not knowing why. And it is not just in Alaska. I think members on both sides of the dais probably will talk about the benefits of the grants to their states and their communities.

You have also proposed massive reorganizations of EPA to include the elimination of the Office of Atmospheric Programs and the Office of Research and Development, now, it is true that Agency is funded by our bill, will have the flexibility to reprogram and reorganize. We provide that flexibility because we know, we get it, there can be urgent and exigent circumstances that warrant such actions.

However, agencies must comply with the requirements and provide the committees with the requisite information, whether it is budgetary and staffing implications, but also the rationale for the actions, to include why these actions are so urgent. And so far, EPA has not adhered to our reprogramming guidelines and has been largely unresponsive to the questions.

So I would certainly expect timely and transparent responses and information. I would expect EPA to abide by the parameters that are outlined in our reprogramming guidelines. And I think, as a former member of Congress, you get it. You have been on the frustration end of things as well, so again, ways that we can be working together.

Now, turning our attention to the fiscal year 2026 budget proposal, in Alaska we have seen on the ground examples of really good things being done with some of the programs that your budget has substantially reduced or proposed to eliminate.

Example: the proposed reduction of the State Revolving Fund, reducing it from \$2.8 billion down to \$305 million. This is an 88 percent reduction. This was one of the ones, when I mentioned unserious proposals, this is the one that I am looking at, because it clearly is one of the most essential programs that the Agency administers. And you mentioned, as part of your justification for cutting this program, that the account has been heavily earmarked. And this is true.

The 66 members of the Senate, including 17 Republicans, making it our most bipartisan account, who requested congressionally directed spending for the SRF accounts did so in connection with the states to ensure the funding was going to critical clean water and drinking water projects. Now, I would also note that in fiscal year 2025, Congress voted for and the President signed into law a full-year CR that keeps the State Review Framework (SRF) fully funded rather than reducing it by the amount of the CDSs.

So I am going to close my comments here with, I don't know if it is a note of sympathy or just—it is an acknowledgment, because I get it. You are, I think, 106 days since you were confirmed and sworn in as EPA Administrator. And for an agency as key and as vital as yours, that is really a short time to get everything up and

running, from enacting the Administration's priorities, to establishing a clear working relationship with us here in Congress.

We know that you are still getting your team in place, because we are trying to move them through our process here, and it is slow. And you need those folks. You need the members of your team. So I am giving you the benefit of the doubt here. There is plenty of time for us to figure out what is working, what is not, and establish open lines of communication between our teams that will mutually benefit your mission and all those that we work for.

So I am eager to start on that. I thank you for your testimony today, your willingness to answer our questions, and just the opportunity to be working with you.

And with that, I turn to Ranking Member Merkley for his comments.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Chair Murkowski, and congratulations on being Chair again. You were Chair from 2015 through 2020, so you are well seasoned in that role. One of the things I really appreciate about the Appropriations Committee, and this subcommittee in particular, is the bipartisan collaboration. Eleven of our twelve appropriation bills went out with, well, massive bipartisan support, most of them unanimously, including the Interior Bill over several years. And we look forward to, hoping to replicate that again.

I just want to see the work that we do in this committee get taken up on the Senate floor, worked with the House, and have that whole bipartisan spirit result in a bill that lands in the Oval Office.

Administrator Zeldin, welcome. This is the ordinary business of Congress that we conduct every year. But this year is not ordinary. Article I of the U.S. Constitution gives the power of the purse to Congress. And under the U.S. Constitution, the President and Executive Branch leaders, like yourself, are required to carry out those spending laws, even if you disagree with them.

As former Appropriations Chair Robert Byrd said, "The legislative control of the purse is a central pillar". The central pillar upon which the Constitutional temple of checks and balances and separation of powers rests. And if that pillar is shaken, the temple will fall. It is central to the liberty, the fundamental liberty, of the American people.

But this administration, the Trump administration, is striving to topple that central pillar of liberty by seizing the power of the purse. President Trump and OMB Director Russell Vought are pursuing a deliberate strategy of impoundments in which they ignore appropriation laws passed by Congress, laws not just passed by Congress but signed by Presidents, and withhold funding intended for specific agencies and programs.

The EPA, the organization that you lead, is one of those agencies. This is not the first time that a President has tried to impound funds for the EPA. President Nixon strived to do that in 1973. The Supreme Court ruled that the Executive Branch could not steal Congress' constitutional power of the purse. In other

words, the Executive Branch must implement the laws passed, signed into law as they are written.

That decision was reaffirmed two decades later, in 1998, when the Supreme Court ruled that Congress could not give the constitutional power of the purse, could not delegate it to the Executive Branch through a line-item veto.

Yet under your leadership, Mr. Zeldin, EPA has illegally and unconstitutionally impounded about \$24 billion, including \$1.7 billion in Environmental Justice grants that help communities address pollution and transition to clean energy. Historically, we know that low-income communities and communities of color have suffered the most from pollution. That is because when people are powerful, they don't want those plants in their community. So they end up in communities where people are less powerful, where they have the least resistance.

And so this funding provides those communities that have those fewer resources the opportunity to protect themselves from the impacts of pollution. For instance, in Oregon, a county was awarded \$20 million for rural communities, like Oakridge, and Veneta, and Cottage Grove to provide shelter during wildfires and severe smoke events, including upgrading their HVAC systems and backup power. But the funding was impounded.

Also impounded was funding for private capital investments to leverage private capital investments for solar installations and efficiency upgrades through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. You may not like those programs, but you are constitutionally obliged to carry out the law as written, and you are not doing so. Illegally impounding these funds, and others, EPA is refusing to spend in dangerous communities by making it harder to address pollution and climate chaos.

If these illegal and unconstitutional impoundments were not bad enough, your budget proposal makes a bad situation worse. It is scant on details. It denigrates science. It antagonizes Federal employees, and it undermines the core functions of the Agency. A budget is a statement of values, and your values are clearly to put the profits of polluters over the interests of the people.

Your budget slashes EPA by 54 percent. It drains 90 percent of funding from the State Revolving Funds, which support communities in meeting standards for tap water, and protecting streams and rivers.

Mr. Zeldin, I go to every county every year in Oregon and hold an open town hall. I meet with the community leaders beforehand, and almost always they are raising issues of the challenge of providing clean water and wastewater treatment. The cost in small communities per person is extraordinary, and these grants have been the salvation for communities as they seek to update infrastructure that is often half a century or more old.

My state knows the benefits of SRF funding, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, used that funding to develop a toxics Reduction Plan to mitigate toxic pollution in the LaMotte River Basin, and the City of Umatilla has had to boil water because of water distribution failures and pressure loss with old infrastructure, and they are using this funding to modernize their clean water supply.

Your budget also eviscerates states by eliminating \$1 billion in grants for cleanup of waterways, complying with air quality requirements, handling hazardous waste properly, and removing lead from drinking water.

Your budget rips a quarter billion dollars out of the Office of Research and Development, which conducts the scientific research needed to inform EPA's decisions on questions of environmental and public safety. In my home state, the ORD labs in Corvallis and Newport research how chemical contaminants will harm communities and ecosystems along the Pacific Coast. We are both coming from Pacific Coast states, it is important to us to understand how to protect the water off our shores.

Pacific Northwest fisheries are the most productive in the world. The upwelling of nutrients and the California Current combine to make them so productive, and therefore this research is not just critical to the environment but to the economy and livelihood of multiple stakeholders along our coast.

Perhaps even more troubling, your budget takes aim against your own employees. The so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, has already taken a wrecking ball to EPA's professional staff. EPA is firing and pushing out, by threat, thousands of staff, including scientists and technical specialists, whose institutional knowledge is irreplaceable. And new staff with nothing but stellar performance reviews.

Without adequate staffing, environmental regulations cannot be enforced. Perhaps that is your goal. Without adequate staffing, dangerous pollutants will not be identified. Perhaps that is your objective. Without adequate staffing, Superfund sites will continue to leak toxic chemicals. Perhaps that is your desire. All of this is happening while EPA carries out a parade of reckless policy actions, tearing down bedrock environmental laws, even allowing industry to simply send one email to get waivers from pollution controls that threaten our health and the environment we live in.

We need an EPA that upholds the law, and upholds the Constitution, that is properly funded, is strongly staffed, is empowered to address urgent environmental challenges of our time. I hope to hear today that you are changing course from your reckless and dangerous pursuit in your opening months. The American people expect and deserve nothing less.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Merkley.

At this time we will turn to the Administrator. It is good to have you before the committee. Your first such engagement, so welcome. I think you will find that this Appropriations Subcommittee is very active, very engaged, with great inquiring minds. So welcome, Mr. Administrator.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF HON. LEE ZELDIN

Mr. ZELDIN. Thank you, Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the President's fiscal year 2026 Budget Request for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

EPA has wasted no time advancing President Trump's directive to help deliver clean air, land, and water for all Americans while

restoring common sense, accountability, and cooperative Federalism to environmental policy. We are fulfilling our core mission of protecting human health and the environment while powering the great American comeback and removing unnecessary barriers that have burdened American families and businesses for far too long.

We hit the ground running, immediately upon President Trump's inauguration, completing the largest wildfire cleanup in Agency history in less than 30 days after the catastrophic Los Angeles wildfires. We are taking bold steps to combat PFAS contamination and have advanced redevelopment at 21 Superfund sites across 13 states, delisting all or parts of four sites from the National Priorities List.

We have also completed 25 State Implementation Plans, 16 of which were backlogged from the prior administration. With this renewed focus and commitment, the EPA is proudly working for the American people. We are revising the definition of "Waters of the United States" to align with the Supreme Court decision in *Sackett*, and have issued immediate actions for Mexico to permanently and urgently end the Tijuana River sewage crisis that has plagued Southern California for decades. Following my trip to St. Louis, we cut nearly 2 years from the cleanup time line at the West Lake Superfund site, which has contaminated—which has been contaminated by nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project.

In fact, to mark the 100th day of the Trump presidency, the EPA released a list of 100 environmental actions we took during those first 100 days, a pace that motivates us to keep up each and every day. Together, these actions reflect the Administration's commitment to environmental stewardship, cooperative Federalism, and delivering results that make a real difference in people's lives.

In lockstep with the President's agenda, EPA is also helping to unleash American energy, pursue permitting reform, make America the AI capital of the world, and bring back American auto jobs. We have eliminated waste and abuse in areas like the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, reversed unlawful overreach like the so-called Good Neighbor Rule, and begun reconsidering many overreaching rules, including the power plan and EV-related regulation that threatens grid reliability, energy affordability, and consumer choice.

These historic actions will reduce regulatory costs, which act as invisible taxes on Americans, making it more affordable now to own a home, heat homes, operate a business, and bring manufacturing back to local communities.

By reducing the EPA's budget by billions of dollars, the President's fiscal year 2026 budget demands maximum efficiency from the EPA while we continue to fulfill all of our statutory obligations, also included in the President's proposal is an additional \$9 million above fiscal year 2025 enacted levels to equip EPA with funds to respond to drinking water disasters.

There is also a \$27 million increase in funding for tribes to address drinking water and wastewater infrastructure on their lands. As I have stated in the past, at the Trump EPA we will not view the status quo as a sacred cow that is untouchable. We will not consider the Biden-era regulations we inherited to be etched in

stone, and we absolutely refuse to waste even a penny of tax dollars.

Under the President's leadership, and with the support of Congress, we will continue to deliver real results with greater accountability and a stronger environmental return on investment per dollar spent.

I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. LEE ZELDIN

Thank you, Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the President's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

EPA has wasted no time advancing President Trump's directive to deliver clean air, land, and water for all Americans—while restoring common sense, accountability, and cooperative federalism to environmental policy. We are fulfilling our core mission of protecting human health and the environment while Powering the Great American Comeback and removing unnecessary barriers that have burdened American families and businesses for far too long.

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By reducing the EPA's budget by billions of dollars, the President's FY 2026 Budget demands maximum efficiency from the EPA while we continue to fulfill all of our statutory obligations. Also, included in the President's proposal is an additional \$9 million above FY 2025 enacted levels to equip EPA with funds to respond to drinking water disasters. There is also a \$27 million increase in funding for Tribes to address drinking water and wastewater infrastructure on their lands.

As I have stated in the past, at the Trump EPA, we will not view the status quo as a sacred cow that is untouchable, we will not consider the Biden era regulations we inherited to be etched in stone, and we absolutely refuse to waste even a penny of tax dollars.

Under the President's leadership, and with the support of Congress, we will continue to deliver real results with greater accountability and a stronger environmental return on investment per dollar spent. I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Administrator. We will have five-minute rounds in order of arrival.

And I will begin with my first five minutes. And again, appreciate the opportunity that you and I have had to discuss some of the particular issues I would like to ensure that we continue that very direct engagement, not only between us but also with our staffs. We have had a conversation about transparency, partnership, and responsiveness, and again, I think you come to this position really from a good place, because you have sat in our seats here, so to speak, when you have asked questions of an agency and you get frustrated because you are not able to get what you are seeking.

So there is a lot going on within the Agency, as you have outlined, and as both the Ranking Member and I have outlined. But we need to be more informed, rather than getting updates by way of tweets or stories from the media. The Agency has issued reorganization notifications, but we are not getting the full picture or the answers to some of the questions that we have asked.

So my direct question to you this morning is just a renewed commitment that the promise of transparency, partnership, and responsiveness is there, that we are going to be able to have meetings between your senior teams and our folks on the appropriation side so that we can help you, let me help you type of an approach. And that is what I am seeking from you this morning, Mr. Administrator.

Mr. ZELDIN. Absolutely, Madam Chair. And you, uniquely amongst 535 members of Congress have a bat phone into my office, which I would encourage you to use at any time. We have spoken since my confirmation, and when we meet, you often have a very long list of priorities for Alaska that you are fighting for, that you are passionate about. And to make sure that we are working through that list at every opportunity is something that will be a priority for our team as long as I am here, as administrator. And I would encourage you to reach out whenever you would like, and I would be available to work through whatever is at the top of your list that day.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Very good. Very good. Let me ask about the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, I mentioned in my opening. These are probably the areas where, on this committee, we have more bipartisan support for a program, and we are looking at a budget that effectively eliminates the one thing that we are all in agreement on.

So I would ask you to share with me and the others on the committee why the Agency would move away from such a critical on-the-ground program when we are talking about access to clean water?

Mr. ZELDIN. Madam Chair, as you pointed out in your opening remarks, and as you referenced from the skinny budget that was released that we are here to talk about today, there has been a bleeding out of funds deliberately through decisions made by Congress to earmark. I understand that when I came into this position, I inherited a lot of earmarks that many of you have fought for, and I want to be able to continue to work with each of you and your staffs.

In some cases, we need to get the recipients to submit paperwork where they are on the receiving end of big earmarks so that we can work through this backlog as quickly as we can. It would be helpful to have a conversation about the SRF and the use of earmarks and how that has been reducing the funding through the years. As you all know, there is a difference when these skinny budgets come out whether or not something is funded at zero dollars, or it is funded at one dollar.

Now, that might not seem like much to the American public in understanding how these conversations go in Congress. The SRF is not zeroed out in the skinny budget, and in fact it has hundreds of millions of dollars there in it. So, as we go forward with this process, I look forward to more conversations about the SRF, and I am sure members of the House and the Senate will be having conversations amongst yourselves as to what you believe to be the appropriate funding level for SRF, as well as the future of the program, and whether or not earmarks will continue to be used to reduce that balance. That is obviously a decision that Congress has a very important role to play.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, we do, and we can have a separate discussion about earmarks. I think we both know that earmarks don't contribute to the top-line number. You are discussing here a concern that I have raised with you, that there has been, over the years, congressionally directed spending, earmarks, that have been moved through the process, authorized and appropriated to, and still not spent down.

So my time has expired now. Know that on this next round I am going to ask for a little more discussion about that. But I do think that given the significance of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, by so many of us, that this is something that: Let us have a broader discussion about how we move forward with, what I would think most of us recognize, has got to be a priority within the EPA.

The Ranking Member of the Full Committee has arrived. Ordinarily, I would defer to my Ranking Member here for his questions, but—okay.

Senator MERKLEY. So as you can tell from my opening statement, I am very concerned about the issue of impoundments. Are you familiar with the concept?

Mr. ZELDIN. Of course, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. You understand that it involves freezing funds that are to be allocated by law?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, I am familiar with the impoundments. I also understand we are having this conversation in the middle of the fiscal year as opposed to after the fiscal year.

Senator MERKLEY. Do you understand that the Constitution of the United States assigns the power of the purse to Congress, and do you follow that understanding?

Mr. ZELDIN. Absolutely.

Senator MERKLEY. So you understand that when you impound funds, you are violating the law?

Mr. ZELDIN. No, Senator. We are going to follow—all statutory obligations, and we will abide by all laws.

Senator MERKLEY. But you are not. You are impounding funds against the law.

Mr. ZELDIN. We absolutely disagree with you, very strongly.

Senator MERKLEY. And the courts have also found it is not just, against the law, it is unconstitutional.

Mr. ZELDIN. If you are citing a particular district court judge, Senator, that is one thing, but there are a lot of district court judges coming up with their own interpretations of the law. That will go through litigation processes, but at EPA we follow the laws.

Senator MERKLEY. So it is the Supreme Court of the United States that has weighed in. And do you consider the Supreme Court not to be a legitimate source of decisionmaking?

Mr. ZELDIN. Of course, the Supreme Court is the highest court in the land.

Senator MERKLEY. Then why are you not following the Supreme Court's understanding of the Constitution and the law?

Mr. ZELDIN. We are following all laws and the Constitution, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. Then why have you frozen 1.7 billion in EJ grants illegally and unconstitutionally?

Mr. ZELDIN. They are neither illegally nor unconstitutionally frozen, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. Are they legally frozen?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, sir.

Senator MERKLEY. Under what authority of the law?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, Congress appropriates funding, and then, say, if the Biden administration is in place last year and they are there at the beginning of the fiscal year, they might apply their own administration's policy priorities. So they might decide to send money to, say, the State of Alaska, and they might include aspects of fighting for equity or education instead of remediation—

Senator MERKLEY. But it wasn't the Biden administration that passed this law, it was Congress. And so this is in the law as written and as signed by President, and yet you are defying it.

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, it would be important that the premise of your question, I mean, we are going to have to just disagree as strongly as possible, whether or not anything—

Senator MERKLEY. You have also frozen Greenhouse Gas Reduction funds, again illegally and unconstitutionally. Are you going to follow the constitution?

Mr. ZELDIN. Neither illegally nor unconstitutionally, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, we now have several court decisions that have said you have acted, and you referred to district court decisions, but you don't agree with those district courts?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, if you are referring to a district court decision that was then stayed by the D.C. Circuit, then I would also encourage you to look at the appeals process, which is important. And as you referenced earlier in a prior question, how important it is to look at the Supreme Court, well, then that message that you would be making to the D.C. district court judge is that the D.C. district court judge didn't have jurisdiction over that case and it belonged inside the Court of Federal Claims. I agree with you how important it is to consider the decisions of the Supreme Court.

Senator MERKLEY. So there is one district court decision you abided by, and that was related to the clean school buses. If other district courts say that this is an illegal impoundment, an unconstitutional impoundment, will you follow the findings of those district courts, or will you simply appeal it upwards?

Mr. ZELDIN. We will abide by all laws and the United States Constitution at all times.

Senator MERKLEY. Well again, the administration has responded to some district court decisions by saying: We will simply appeal it. We will seek a stay in an appeal. Will you follow—when a district court says you have illegally impounded funds, will you follow that district court decision?

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, as you pointed out, Senator, the Supreme Court is the highest court in the land. So, if a district court judge makes a decision, we are not going to assume that the United States Supreme Court is going to agree with that district court.

Senator MERKLEY. Even though the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that impoundments are unconstitutional. So your decision is to simply appeal to the Supreme Court, seeking a different decision this time around?

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, I know that we are talking about hypotheticals of district court decisions to come, but as far as the district court decision that have been made—

Senator MERKLEY. It is actually, not hypothetical, because we already have a series of district court decisions saying that this is illegal and unconstitutional.

Mr. ZELDIN. As far as the district court decisions that have been made, it is important to note, as I stated a minute ago, the district court judge decision that you were referencing in the D.C. Circuit was instantly stayed by the D.C. Circuit.

Senator MERKLEY. Do you understand that impounding funds essentially makes the appropriation power of Congress very difficult? We have to reach decisions about funding that is important to Alaska, to Oregon, but also to every region of the country. And if then we strike this law, we strike these decisions to help address environmental issues in every part of the country, and then the Executive comes along and says: We want the power of the purse. We are going to treat these laws as suggestions. We are going to freeze these funds for programs we don't like, or regions we don't like, or congressional districts we don't like, that completely undermines the dialogue and the ability of—here in Congress to produce bipartisan bills?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, I don't know if on either side of the dais I have ever heard in one round of questions more premise of questions that I possibly disagree with. I refuse to waste a dollar of tax dollars, period.

Senator MERKLEY. Since you are violating both the law and the Constitution, will you follow your oath? And if you cannot follow your oath, will you resign from your office?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yeah, Senator, listen, you like to preface your questions with declaring everything unconstitutional, illegal. We could not possibly disagree more strongly with what you are saying. What I do believe would be illegal is for me to play along where I am seeing unqualified recipients getting funding, where I see an

entity like a \$2 billion recipient, Power Forward Communities, that gets \$100 of GGR funds in 2023, and then they get \$2 billion in 2024.

When I see self-dealing and conflicts of interest loading up recipients of people who are Biden officials, and Obama officials, and Democrat donors; when I see wording of financial agent agreements and account control agreements that tie the hands of the EPA behind its back, will I play along with that? No, absolutely not, because this is the——

Senator MERKLEY. In which case, you should resign, because the President is involved in self-dealing.

Mr. ZELDIN. I should resign, because I don't want to waste money?

Senator MERKLEY. At a level we have never seen on this.

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, if I refuse to waste money, I should resign?

Senator MERKLEY. If I would just conclude, Madam Chair, Madam Chair, I will just conclude by saying this issue of impoundments is an extraordinary challenge. The Supreme Court has ruled twice. The Constitution is clear. You took an oath to the Constitution, and it is extremely destructive of our legislative process for you to be engaged in this.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let us move to Senator Fischer.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Administrator, it is really good to see you today. Thank you for being here. Before I get to a couple questions, I wanted to quickly just note the support for some of your efforts. Earlier this month, you announced reorganizational efforts to strengthen the Agency. You specifically noted how these efforts will help to address the over 12,000 pesticide reviews that need to get done. Nebraska farmers rely on many of these crop protection tools, and we need to ensure strong science and risk-based reviews.

Madam Chair, I would ask to enter into the record a letter from the Pesticide Registration Improvement Act (PRIA) Coalition in support of the Administrator's work there.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

May 9, 2025

The Honorable Lee Zeldin
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Administrator Zeldin:

On behalf of the Pesticide Registration Improvement Act (PRIA) Coalition, we commend the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for its recent announcement to strengthen the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention (OCSPP) and to add staff to the Office of Pesticide Programs (OPP) to address the over 12,000 pesticide reviews that are well beyond their statutory timelines. We hope this reorganization represents meaningful progress toward addressing the pesticide registration backlog and improving the transparency and efficiency of the regulatory process.

We strongly support the work that you, OCSPP leaders, and the OPP team are undertaking to modernize and streamline pesticide permitting. We believe that the statutory timeframes set forth under the Pesticide Registration and Improvement Act (PRIA) and the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) can be met through a combination of process efficiency improvements and investments in staffing and resources. PRIA 5, enacted in December 2022, requires that Congress appropriate a minimum of \$166 million annually for pesticide licensing activities. We hope that the President's Fiscal Year 2026 budget request will honor the law's requirement, and that Congress will appropriate the required funds. A fully funded, transparent, and science-driven OPP is essential to ensuring that growers, public health professionals, facility managers, animal caretakers, consumers, and other users have access to the critical tools they need to protect our public health, food supply, natural resources, infrastructure, and green spaces from pests.

Under PRIA, the Agency committed to complete an independent, third-party workforce and process assessment and to develop a training curriculum to improve the scientific, technical, and administrative skills of OPP employees. The assessment is critically important to improving OPP's service and is intended to review and make recommendations about OPP's processes and performance. The training program establishes a competitive grant program and awards funding to a land grant university or other qualifying higher-learning institution to promote consistent regulatory decision making and improve program efficiency. This training program will be extremely valuable as EPA works to increase OPP staffing levels. We encourage OPP to promptly move forward with the assessment and training program to identify critical process and infrastructure deficiencies, to determine what regulatory improvements and process efficiencies can be made, and to ensure the consistent and predictable administration of the pesticide permitting program.

The PRIA Coalition remains steadfast in its support for OPP and has consistently advocated for transparent and timely regulatory outcomes and enhanced OPP capacity. We are committed to

working with the Agency and Congress to ensure OPP has the staff and resources it needs to meet statutory obligations and maintain a predictable, science-based registration process.

Sincerely,
American Chemistry Council's Center for Biocide Chemistries
Animal Health Institute
Biological Products Industry Alliance
Biotechnology Innovation Organization
CropLife America
Council of Producers & Distributors of Agrotechnology
Household & Commercial Products Association
ISSA, The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association
RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment)

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. I would also like to quickly thank you, Administrator, for your deregulatory efforts, including reconsideration of the Clean Power Plan 2.0 Rule. Nebraska is an all public power state, the only one in the union, and our rural electric cooperative, they have raised significant concerns about that rule.

So Madam Chair, I would like to also enter this supportive press release from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) into the record.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

Press Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 12, 2025

Contact: Dan Riedinger | 202-403-7517
electric.coop | @NRECAnews

Electric Co-ops Applaud EPA Review of Power Plant Rules

Matheson: End to regulatory onslaught comes 'not a moment too soon'

ARLINGTON, Va. – National Rural Electric Cooperative Association CEO Jim Matheson today issued the following statement applauding the Environmental Protection Agency's announced reconsideration of its unlawful Power Plant Rule and other regulations that undermine electric reliability.

"Today's EPA announcements are another critical step that puts our nation on a path towards a more reliable and resilient electric grid—and not a moment too soon," Matheson said. "Electricity demand is skyrocketing, yet bad public policy decisions are forcing always-available generation resources to retire faster than they can be reliably replaced.

"EPA's unlawful and unachievable Power Plant Rule exceeded the agency's authority and jeopardized reliable and affordable energy across the nation. We deeply appreciate this administration's commitment to American energy dominance and sound policies that protect our environment, without leaving American consumers in the dark."

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association is the national trade association representing nearly 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation's landscape. As local businesses built by the consumers they serve, electric cooperatives have meaningful ties to rural America and invest \$15 billion annually in their communities.

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Senator FISCHER. Thank you. Administrator, a couple of months back, Secretary Rollins met with me and several of my colleagues about the importance of Congress passing a permanent, nationwide solution to allow for the year-round sale of E15. And I thank you. I thank you for acting on the emergency summertime waivers to allow for the year-round sale of E15 again this year. But certainly this yearly exercise, it needs to be done permanently.

We need to pass a solution, a permanent solution, and not have your Agency have to go through this product every single year. The President tried to get E15 done permanently through regulation back in 2019, and he has maintained strong support for it since.

I want people to understand the history here, Mr. Zeldin. We have effectively been operating under year-round E15 for the last 6 years, although President Trump's regulation, or through President Trump's regulation, and then yearly emergency waivers; is that correct?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Senator.

Senator FISCHER. Is it true that despite President Trump's best efforts, if we want real certainty here for consumers, Congress has to act; is that correct?

Mr. ZELDIN. That is the most durable and easiest solution to this issue.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. And lastly, having that permanent, nationwide, legislative solution for the year-round E15 would certainly be a more efficient and effective use of EPA's time and resources; is that correct?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Senator. As the Chair pointed out, I have been in the position a little over 100 days, and I have had many, many, many meetings about this topic, and a lot of passionate advocacy from—including you, Senator, and your colleagues and your constituents. If Congress was to finalize a long-term, durable solution, so much of that advocacy on your part, all of your time, can be better spent fighting for other priorities of your constituents.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. As you know, the last administration failed to issue the Renewable Volume Obligations that were due last November. The RVOs, they also set volumes that were 2023 to 2025 that were too low, and it didn't account for the increased soy crushing levels to support biofuel production, including increased crushing capacity that is going to be coming online in Nebraska.

I hope that you will set blending volumes for biomass-based diesel that are in line with production and capacity of that industry. Do you have any update on the time line for when we can expect to see the RVOs?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Senator. We are going through a rulemaking process now over the course of the next few months. We did inherit a blown deadline. We are looking to not only resolve that deadline in setting RVOs, but to also look to the future and to operate going forward in a way where we don't blow any deadlines moving forward.

So, over the course of the next few months, there is going to be an opportunity for the public to weigh in during a public comment period before a final decision is made. We have already started to hear a lot of advocacy from many of your constituents in Nebraska fighting hard for RVOs.

Senator FISCHER. As you know, the farm economy is suffering right now, and farmers are worried about a number of things. In order to help provide more certainty I really appreciate your agency being on time with what needs to be done in order to provide them with that assurance and with certainty.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, sir.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We will next turn to the Ranking Member of the Full Committee, Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley. I look forward to working with both of you this year.

Administrator Zeldin, you helm an agency that was created by a Republican President that is responsible for making sure that Americans can drink clean water, and breathe clean air and lead healthy lives. It seems to me the Trump administration's entire vi-

sion for your Agency amounts to burn it down. Now, burning down the EPA might be a great way to generate smog, but it is a terrible way to protect families' health.

Look at the \$25 billion in Federal funding you have been illegally freezing and canceling in my state and across the country. We are talking about investments in things like heat pumps to reduce energy costs and pollution, wildfire preparedness to prevent smoke exposure, or infrastructure upgrades to protect drinking water from floods and earthquakes.

Blocking this funding is hurting communities everywhere. It has prompted lawsuits as well as investigations by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and I have to say to you it is unacceptable to hear from GOA (sic) that your Agency has not been cooperating with those requests from them. And now the President's request would slash funding for your Agency by over 50 percent, taking it back to levels last seen 50 years ago, by the way.

And I should note, protecting the health and well-being of the American public doesn't happen on its own. The EPA is powered by skilled and dedicated public servants, a group you have worked to demonize for months on end. Now, while you proudly gut your own Agency's workforce, you leave hardworking Americans who are suffering the consequences. Your job is to make sure kids have clean water when they turn on the tap, fresh air when they go outside. Your job is to make sure that our rivers in Washington State are full of salmon, not toxic sludge. And your job is to follow the law and to get the funds out that Congress passed.

For the past 2 years, this committee has passed bipartisan spending bills to invest in the EPA and into our communities. And despite the draconian budget that you have put forward, I am going to be pushing to work with this committee on a bipartisan agreement once again that safeguards our health and our environment.

Now, Administrator Zeldin, at the same time you propose cutting the EPA's budget by 54 percent and slashing staff by over 20 percent, and gutting many of EPA's core programs, you insist that despite these cuts, the EPA can carry out the Congressional directives of the bill we passed with bipartisan support through this committee without compromising the EPA's responsibilities. There is no way that can be true.

Do you understand, Administrator, that your job is to execute the bipartisan laws negotiated in this committee and in Congress and carry them out faithfully, not to gut the programs that Congress passed into law?

Mr. ZELDIN. Of course we will fulfill all statutory obligations, and I would encourage you to read the announcement that we put out the morning of the President's 100th day that has 100 environmental wins from the first 100 days of the Trump presidency. I don't know if you have had an opportunity to read it yet, but based on what—

Senator MURRAY. Well, I have had an opportunity to see your budget, and when you eliminate offices and slash staffing and propose cutting the budget in half of EPA, you are making certain that the Government will not be able to protect the public from pollution. That is not what Congress intended.

Now, the Federal Government has given states significant responsibility to implement our bedrock environmental laws, like enforcement of the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. EPA provides basic funding, categorical grants, to every single state so they can carry out more than 90 percent of on-the-ground work that is necessary to comply with environmental laws. Your budget cuts 16 of 19 categorical grant programs, which the Environmental Council of the States, a bipartisan organization of environmental agency directors from all 50 states, says will, quote, "Incapacitate state environmental programs". That is from them, not from me.

We are talking about massive cuts, \$843 million for Texas, \$459 million for Florida, \$169 million for Louisiana. It is hard to see this as anything other than the EPA abandoning its responsibility to states. And I want to ask you, have you consulted with any of the states on this proposal to eliminate almost all the categorical grant funding?

Mr. ZELDIN. Every aspect of this skinny budget was done deliberately as a result of a lot of conversation, a lot of thoughtful conversation—

Senator MURRAY. With the states?

Mr. ZELDIN. States are absolutely included as it relates to conversations that take place—about conversations that take place about our priorities.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I will say my state and many of the states said this would be devastating, and states cannot shoulder this burden. And I look forward to working with this committee to, as we have done before, in a bipartisan way, make sure that we fund these programs.

Finally, your Agency has been cutting billions of dollars in grants, indiscriminately, irrationally, across the country, including in my home state of Washington. And I want to give you an example: wildfire and extreme heat waves, they are major threats to public health for a lot of the country. A few weeks ago, the EPA terminated a grant that would have made sure community centers in Spokane had the infrastructure needed to serve as a refuge during extreme weather and wildfire emergencies. There was no explanation for that cancellation.

That is a community that saw 19 people die and over 300 people hospitalized during a heat wave a few short years ago, where wildfires are a constant threat. So let me ask you, is it WOKE to protect people from wildfires and heat stroke?

Mr. ZELDIN. I don't know if you are going to get anyone in America to answer yes to the way you put that question out there.

Senator MURRAY. Well, is it inefficient? Is it wasteful? Why was this grant eliminated?

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, there are hundreds of grants. I would have to have that individual grant in front of me. One of the—well, when Congress sets an appropriated level on a particular type of grant, we need to make sure that over the course of the fiscal year that that money is being spent, that we are working with Congress—

Senator MURRAY. Well, apparently, after 4 months, you decided that this community in Spokane didn't need to deal with their extreme weather and wildfire emergencies. I don't know whether

the—you won't tell me whether it is inefficient, waste, but whatever your word is.

Mr. ZELDIN. We are not.

Senator MURRAY. But you need to know that you are abandoning communities in my state and across the country, and that funding was appropriated for work exactly like this.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Let us go to Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And Administrator, thanks for being here today. Appreciate having you. Both North American Reliability Corporation (NERC) and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) have expressed concerns about grid reliability for our electric grid nationwide. And the reason, as you know, is very simply because we are losing baseload on the grid and we have more and more variable sources of energy.

And one of the big reasons we are losing that baseload is because of the regulatory blizzard that has been put in place by the Biden administration that is forcing coal plants to close down with no benefit to the environment. We continue to move forward in our state with the latest, greatest technological innovations to address SOx, NOx, mercury, CO2, you name it, right, and yet they are still forcing these plants to close down.

But it is putting the grid at risk. So talk to me about how you are going to take steps to unwind these burdensome rules, like the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) Rule, and like the Clean Power Plan 2.0?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, we believe at EPA we can choose to both protect the environment and grow the economy. It is not a binary choice where we have to pick one or the other. Over the course of the last couple years of the Biden EPA, there were a lot of regulations that came out, many of which seeking to strangle entire industries, to put, for example, the coal sector completely out.

Well, these are jobs. For many states, this is how they are powering their lives. This is an important engine of their economy. On March 12th, EPA announced many different regulatory actions, including a reconsideration of that Biden-era MATS Rule, including what is called Clean Power Plan 2.0, as you referenced, and other rules as well.

Now, some people like to post some photograph, you know, of the '60s and '70s and say that if we get rid of some regulation from 2024, this is what the water is going to look like, this is what the air is going to be like. We are talking about regulations from the last year or two. And we are going to go through a reconsideration we are going to follow the Administrative Procedures Act. There is going to be a public comment period. And while I cannot prejudge the outcomes now, at the end of the process, when I am supposed to, we will make a decision on what the future should look like on each individual regulation, Senator.

Senator HOEVEN. Right. The same thing now for Waters of the U.S., talk to me about how we are going to make sure that private property rights are respected with Waters of the U.S., which once again the Trump administration had put in place a responsible rule.

Mr. ZELDIN. The Supreme Court, in Sackett, has very clear, simple, prescriptive language as to what should be a Water of the U.S. EPA seeks to follow the Supreme Court in Sackett and to make sure that there is a simple, durable rule that can withstand the test of time, that would allow any farmer or rancher, landowner, anywhere in America, or state like Alaska and others, they will know whether or not water that is on land is a water of the U.S. or not.

And what is very important to point out is that just because a water might not be a Water of the U.S., as it relates to Sackett, that doesn't mean that a state loses the ability to have oversight over that waterway. And that is a big misunderstanding as to what we are talking about here.

So we are doing a rulemaking to reconsider the definition of Waters of the U.S., to get the definition for EPA in line with the Sackett decision of the United States Supreme Court.

We don't want any of your landowners to have to go pay an attorney or a consultant to tell them whether or not the water on their property is a water of the U.S. I want every one of your ranchers and landowners to know whether or not there is a Water of the U.S. on their property. We owe it to them. And we should look at a map of the United States that has one definition that is being followed in all 50 states. We shouldn't have different definitions depending on what state we are in. And no matter what happens in presidential elections of the future, if we do this right and we come up with a simple definition that follows the Supreme Court decision in Sackett, the definition that we come up with now should be one that withstands the test of time.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you. And I also appreciate you referencing respect for states' rights. Respect for private property rights and respect for states' rights are constitutionally protected, and it is vitally important that the EPA and other Federal agencies don't overstep those constitutional rights.

Mr. ZELDIN. Agreed, Senator.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Don't forget permafrost.

Senator Baldwin.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Zeldin, Wisconsin's coastal communities and tribal nations depend on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to protect water quality of both Lake Superior and Lake Michigan. The initiative has been essential for cleaning up pollution, managing invasive species, and safeguarding access to clean water for over 40 million people. For every dollar spent on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, nearly \$4 in additional economic activity is produced. These outcomes have only been possible because of strong collaboration between EPA and its regional partners.

So your fiscal year 2026 skinny budget makes no mention of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, or the staffing necessary to carry it out. So I would like you to tell us today what the Administration's budget will include for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, while we are here and we are only able to speak about the skinny budget because the full budget has not

been released, because you are asking about the Great Lakes Restoration Program, and I have heard from the Vice President, who has fought for this program as well, a former Senator from Ohio. This is something that there is great pride inside of the Agency for, the Great Lakes Restoration Program. There is a lot of support inside of the Administration to make sure that this program is funded and it continues very strong.

Senator BALDWIN. Okay. So it will continue and it will be fully funded?

Mr. ZELDIN. It will.

Senator BALDWIN. In the budget.

Mr. ZELDIN. It will absolutely continue. And while I can't speak to a full budget that has not been released yet, I am confident that you will have a smile on your face as it relates to the Great Lakes Restoration Program when you see it.

Senator BALDWIN. Wisconsin communities also face several challenges that make it more difficult to meet the demand and the expectation of access to clean drinking water. And we have increasing threats from PFAS contamination, an overabundance of lead service lines still, and inadequate and aging wastewater infrastructure. Our public water systems have relied on the EPA's State Revolving Funds to upgrade their water systems, to fix things that are broken so that they can protect families and workers.

This budget decimates the State Revolving Funds, and our nation's primary Federal program for funding water infrastructure projects. How do you justify this funding cut, this decimation, to a family in Milwaukee seeking to protect their children from lead in their drinking water due to lead service lines? Or a farmer relying on a rural public water system that hopes to provide PFAS-free water to their workers and their livestock?

Mr. ZELDIN. As I mentioned, Senator, to Chairwoman Murkowski's question on this topic earlier, this is a good time for a conversation as it relates to the bleeding out of funding for SRF. Congress chooses—

Senator BALDWIN. We are having this conversation right now.

Mr. ZELDIN. Right.

Senator BALDWIN. And you are hearing, I hope strongly, from this committee that we are committed to restoration of those funds because they serve such a vital function in our communities.

I wanted to add a couple of words to Senator Fischer's question about biofuels. I just want you to know that the biofuels industry is incredibly important in Wisconsin. We have several ethanol and biodiesel producers. Certainly, we have corn and soybean farmers and rural manufacturing jobs that depend on a predictable and forward-looking renewable fuel standard.

A strong standard would not only provide domestic market certainty to farmers during a time of volatile international market access, as you know, but also invest in our nation's energy independence while lowering fuel costs for consumers and creating domestic manufacturers jobs.

So I urge you to release a proposed renewable volume obligation rulemaking soon, and hope that the proposal will reflect market growth and demand in this sector.

Mr. ZELDIN. I agree.

Senator BALDWIN. All right. Lastly, Wisconsin is home to an array of diverse landscapes, from the coasts of the Mississippi River, and the Great Lakes, to the wetlands and grasslands across the Driftless Area of our state, to the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, many of our state's most effective environmental conservation and restoration projects across these regions promote biodiversity to protect their ecosystems.

Can you confirm for me right now that the Trump administration's executive order to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion at the Federal level has not led to projects being deprioritized, delayed, or defunded by EPA if they mention such terms as "biodiversity"?

Mr. ZELDIN. Off hand, I can't think of a particular example. I would have to go back and talk to the team to see if there is anything.

Senator BALDWIN. Can you assure me that the executive order on diversity, equity, and inclusion has not led to random word searches for words like "diversity" that lead to cutoffs in funding? Can you guarantee me that that has not happened at the EPA?

Mr. ZELDIN. I wouldn't guarantee that. I would imagine that if we—when we received an executive order as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion that the team was probably—

Senator BALDWIN. Does that include "biodiversity", in your opinion?

Mr. ZELDIN. What I am saying is I would have to—as it relates to that term "biodiversity", I would have to check with the team. I am not aware of that, but I would have to ask.

Senator BALDWIN. Do you think supporting and promoting biodiversity somehow violates the President's executive order relating to bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion funding?

Mr. ZELDIN. I would have to see examples of how that term was applied to a particular program or grant in order to be able to answer that.

Senator ROUNDS [presiding]. Thank you, Senator Baldwin.

And on behalf of the Chairman, I think she went to vote, now that we are actually trying to get our 15-minute votes in again, and I think we are all trying to honor that.

Okay. Administrator Zeldin, first of all, welcome, I am new to this subcommittee as well, and I look forward to having the opportunity to work with you. I want to thank you, first of all, for your willingness to revise the Waters of the United States, or WOTUS Rulemaking. As you know, the last several decades, wetlands that were drained to become cropland prior to 1985 have remained exempt from regulation under the Clean Water Act.

The first Trump administration clarified the rules governing prior converted cropland, or PCC, protecting affected land from clean water regulation as long as it was used for agricultural purposes at least once every 5 years. You are going to hear a lot about these ag issues as you come into this position. The most recent Waters of the United States (WOTUS) rule under the Biden administration ended the prior converted cropland exemption immediately upon a change in use.

This departs significantly from the flexibility provided by President Trump's 2020 WOTUS Rule. I recently introduced the Farm-

ers Freedom Act to codify President Trump's earlier definition of prior converted cropland.

My question today for you, Administrator Zeldin, as you work to develop an updated WOTUS framework, will you consider revisiting the definition of prior converted cropland?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, I would be happy to follow up with you on that to make sure that we are heeding your calls and considering the merits of your point.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. And look, I really appreciate your comments on WOTUS and where it is going, and the concern to have some clear definitions laid out that everybody can understand from administration to administration. The ongoing uncertainty surrounding WOTUS regulations has been a major challenge for American farmers, and I have appreciated your commitment to working closely with the ag producers as you undertake this rule-making process. And I appreciate that. You are going to find there are a lot of folks that want to work with you on that particular issue.

My next question; and you know, I want to just go back to something just to provide you an opportunity. There are a lot of us here that really do think that there is an importance to the clean and drinking water state revolving loan funds, and there is a \$2.46 billion decrease in the skinny budget proposal that has been laid out. So let me just ask this question on it: Congress appropriates and we direct, we authorize and so forth.

My suspicion is that Congress will seriously consider reappropriating those funds again. Would it be fair to say, although there have been some suggestions that you are not following the law and so forth, if we appropriate it and direct that it be put back into those revolving loan funds, you will follow the law and you will see that it has been done?

Mr. ZELDIN. Of course. Yes, Senator.

Senator ROUNDS. Okay. And I just appreciate that, because I think the misunderstanding is that somehow you are not going to follow a law on this, when Congress puts it in, and we say no, we want it back in, and it should go back out to the states. At that stage of the game, we can count on you working with us to get it done appropriately?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, and I appreciate you raising this point and this example. Congress appropriates funding, and then the Agency distributes that funding as it is required to under the law. That doesn't mean from one administration to the next, that the Trump administration is going to come in agreeing with the policy priorities of the prior administration that just left office.

There might be a disagreement of opinion between administrations, and we come in towards the beginning of a fiscal year, the way that funding will go out over the course of a fiscal year might be applying the new administration's priorities, as the American public voted for last November.

Senator ROUNDS. Right, and based upon where there is broad latitude provided to the Executive Branch in the expenditure of those authorities, but where the Congress is more specific in their appropriations, it makes it cleaner and more directed in terms of your ability to decide upfront whether it is truly the will of Con-

gress to do it in one particular program, such as these Revolving Loan Funds?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, I love your question. And this applies to so much, from appropriation to policy. If Congress wants an agency to take a specific action, Congress can give an obligation to an agency. I am here, as I was during my confirmation process, and I will continue to come before Congress committing to fulfill all statutory obligations. And if there is some new statutory obligation that is created because of some law that is passed, say a month from now, our Agency will fulfill those statutory obligations. It is a really important point. Thank you, Senator.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you.

And at this time, on behalf of the Chairman, I would recognize Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Senator.

And welcome, Administrator Zeldin. I noticed that as a member of Congress during the first Trump administration, you opposed their recommended cuts to EPA's Long Island Sound Program. Similarly, during the first Trump administration, those of us who represent Chesapeake Bay states successfully opposed, on a bipartisan basis, their proposed cuts to the Chesapeake Bay Program.

I am glad to see that the Spend Plan that was submitted by EPA for fiscal year 2025 shows that you plan to continue to invest in the Chesapeake Bay Cleanup Program at the appropriated and authorized levels of 92 million. I just want to confirm with you today, yes or no, that is right, isn't it?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes. Everything in the skinny budget that is before us, the answer is yes when repeating what you all are reading.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Well, this is with respect to the spend plan, which is separate from the skinny budget.

Mr. ZELDIN. Right.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. If you also—

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, and by the way—and I will answer maybe your next question, the Chesapeake Bay Program, which I know you are fighting hard for, as we heard Senator Baldwin reference and the Great Lakes Restoration Program, the Chesapeake Bay Program is an amazing program. Our team takes great pride in running it. It is filled with a lot of success stories that span multiple states, including yours, and we will make sure that you also have a smile on your face as Senator Baldwin will have on hers when the full budget is released and you see the numbers for Chesapeake Bay.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that very much. You anticipated my next question, right, fiscal year 2026. So thank you. Now, let me turn to an area where we have some significant disagreement, which is the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. In just the last few days, an independent analysis of the benefits of that fund was conducted by the University of New Hampshire. It was released. Simple question, have you had a chance to read it?

Mr. ZELDIN. Is that the one that was written by a former Biden administration official?

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I don't believe so but we can check it.

Mr. ZELDIN. I think so.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Here is my question.

Mr. ZELDIN. I don't know if there is a——

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Have you read it, was my question?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, if you are referring to the——

Senator VAN HOLLEN. This is on May 12th.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes. If you are referring—if that is the one that I am thinking of, because I was presented a document, it might have been that, what you are looking at, I understand it was referred to as independent.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. All right. Okay.

Mr. ZELDIN. But my understanding from the person who gave it to me is that it was written by a former Biden——

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Well, we will take a look at it, but hopefully, just being a member of an administration doesn't disqualify somebody from a fair analysis.

Let me move on, because this analysis shows significant benefits from the deployment of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, including 41,000 new jobs each year compared to current policy, over \$20 billion in additional wages by the year 2031, and very importantly, a whopping savings of \$52 billion over the next 20 years for consumers. And I hope you will read it and give it a fair look, because you have made some wild, untrue, and reckless statements to justify your illegal freezing of these funds.

And Mr. Administrator, I can say that with confidence because the veracity of your statements has been scrutinized by the Federal courts. Right, that is where, unlike on media outlets, you actually have to present evidence under penalty of perjury, you and your lawyers on your behalf.

So let us look at what Federal District Court Judge Chutkan has said, after weighing the evidence and claims that you have made. During a hearing in early April, the judge pressed the lawyers for any evidence to back up your claims of waste, fraud, and abuse, and found that EPA, and I quote, "Never proffered this adequate evidence", unquote. The judge wrote that the EPA, and I am quoting, "Has failed to provide a single piece of evidence to support your claims".

She went on to find that EPA acted, quote, "arbitrarily and capriciously", unquote. And she goes on to make a number of other factual findings in that case. I am well aware of the fact that you have appealed her decision, but these are factual findings based on the lack of evidence for the claims that you have made.

Let me ask you this. You have received five letters, some as early as February 24th, from committees of Congress on this question of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. We checked this morning, based on what we know, you have not replied to a single one. So my final question here——

Mr. ZELDIN. That is not accurate, sir.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. What is that?

Mr. ZELDIN. I don't believe that is accurate.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. Well, we double-checked, and if we are wrong, we will correct the record. But there are five of them. And my question here to you today is twofold. One, will you commit to responding to those letters from Members of Congress? And number two, will you meet with me to discuss the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, its status, and its future?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, we had, as you know, an opportunity to talk about the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund a couple weeks ago when we saw each other, I am happy to have a follow-up meeting to discuss it further. I have personally read every single letter that every Member of Congress has sent me, whether you are on, you know, Senate Approps, you are on Senate EPW, or you are not, and that same thing applies to the House side. I have read every letter.

I believe every single member of this committee who sent me a letter has received a response up to this particular point. You referenced the judge—the D.C., a District Court Judge's decision, and it is important to note that that decision was stayed by a circuit court. I would further point out, because—and I don't know, Senator, if you have actually read the judge's 31-page opinion.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Actually, I have. And I have got it right here.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. Great. If you would not mind, Senator, if you can look—can I just finish the point real quick?

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Of course.

Mr. ZELDIN. Then if you can—if you wouldn't mind, checking out the footnote on page 29.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Yes.

Mr. ZELDIN. It says that we have not provided any evidence of reduced oversight after the November election, but we provided the judge the January 13th amended Account Control Agreement that does exactly that. Now, it is a decision that the judge makes to make believe that that document, that that wasn't provided to the judge. Now here is the other thing—

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Mr. Administrator—I am going to reclaim my time.

Senator MURKOWSKI. And I am going to intervene because we are in the middle of two votes. We still have three more members that need to ask their questions, so.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that. I just want, therefore, Mr. Administrator, I look forward to meeting with you to discuss these things. As you know, in court, that is where people have to testify under penalty of perjury. I don't mean you, your lawyers on your behalf. And these are the findings I read from the judge.

Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair. I look forward to continuing the conversation and getting responses to those letters. I wasn't citing them from this committee's members. There are five other members on other committees, including EPW, who at least have told us they have not gotten responses. So we will follow up on that one.

Senator MURKOWSKI. And we will have an opportunity in the second round.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Okay.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Senator Capito.

Senator CAPITO. Oh. Thank you, Madam Chair. And I am going to just make a statement, that I have to go back because I have an EPW hearing, and you are coming in front of our committee, I believe, next week.

First of all, I am really pleased that EPA officials are in Charleston, West Virginia. The past EPA wouldn't come to Charleston, West Virginia unless we kind of pressured them under duress to

talk about the new WOTUS Rule. So I know, I am pleased that you all are listening to our farmers, our landowners, our local officials are being heard, so I appreciate the quick and outward listening sessions that you are doing to a very overreaching and impactful rule.

On your reorganization, and we can dig into this more next week. I am very pleased that you have put more emphasis on the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention. As you know, our chemical office over the last 4 years has been extremely sluggish, if non-existent, in terms of licensing new chemicals, which are cleaner, greener, and safer. And for the life of me, I could not figure out why they were stuck.

We have a small refinery in West Virginia that has had three court cases that have judged on their behalf for the small refinery exemption. I know I brought that up to you before, so hopefully you are still looking into that.

And the last thing I would say is the Clean Power Plan 2.0. Luckily, it is getting frittered away because of the impacts it would have on jobs in my state and also on the ability for all of our states to provide the energy that we need and that we know we are going to want here in the future. So thank you very much. You don't need to respond, I just wanted to say welcome, see you next week, and appreciate it.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Capito. We are all running this morning, so don't take any offense that we are like jack-in-the-boxes here.

Let us go to Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you for convening the hearing.

Administrator, good to see you, and welcome.

Mr. ZELDIN. Thanks.

Senator OSSOFF. Administrator, are you familiar with Thomasville, Georgia?

Mr. ZELDIN. I have been in a lot of parts of Georgia. I was just in Georgia about a week and a half ago.

Senator OSSOFF. Thomasville is in Southwest Georgia. It is a great town, known for southern hospitality, great people, Mayor Mobley, Pastor Rich, there is a lot of agricultural activity around there. There is also a history, a legacy, of heavy industry that has led to significant air pollution, and there remain significant concerns about air pollution, specifically particulate matter 2.5, and reported high levels of leukemia and pneumonia in and around Thomasville.

And as you know, oftentimes these rural communities don't get the love and attention of the Federal Government, they can be forgotten. In Georgia, big cities tend to get a lot of the Federal support. So there was great news for the good people of Thomasville last year when they won an EPA grant to help build a new health clinic, rehabbing the gym in the school to build a new federally qualified health center near three daycare centers, as well as to upgrade wastewater infrastructure.

Earl Williams, who leads the Thomasville Community Development Corporation, called the grant a game changer. Mayor Mobley

said the award represented a, quote, “Transformative opportunity to make vital health and safety improvements.”

But, Administrator, you canceled the grant, and I would like to know why.

Mr. ZELDIN. So I am looking at, this was part of the Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grant program?

Senator OSSOFF. That is right.

Mr. ZELDIN. And this gets to an earlier interaction that we had, and Senator Rounds got added as well. When Congress appropriates a block of funding, an administration is going to apply their policy priorities to how that money is going to get spent. A new administration comes in. We still have to spend the appropriated funding unless something changes with—

Senator OSSOFF. Administrator, with respect, I understand the appropriations process. My question is why you canceled this grant. What is it about building a new health clinic and upgrading wastewater infrastructure for my constituents in Thomasville, Georgia, that is inconsistent with administration policy?

Mr. ZELDIN. So I don’t have the full grant in front of me. I only have a topline, which program it came out of. So when a new administration comes in and they apply their policy priorities—

Senator OSSOFF. You are repeating yourself. My question is why you canceled this grant.

Mr. ZELDIN. So when a new administration comes in, in this case, President Trump put out executive orders as it relates to environmental justice, with regards to DEI, I would imagine that would—

Senator OSSOFF. What does this have to do with—is a new health clinic for Thomasville, Georgia, Woke?

Mr. ZELDIN. As I imagine, as we look through the details of the particular program, there must be some aspects of this applying the last administration’s priorities on environmental justice or it has got—

Senator OSSOFF. Here is a community, here is a community that suffered from air pollution, has a high disease burden as a result. Finally, the Federal Government comes, they are going to help build a health clinic and upgrade some infrastructure. You canceled the grant, devastating for the community.

Here is what the Head of the Community Development Corporation said about your decision to cancel this grant, denying my constituents a new health clinic, and new wastewater infrastructure. A decision you made that hurts my constituents in Thomasville. Here is what he said, quote: “We all worked so hard for this, and we won. And then all of a sudden, one day, it is gone. And it was just a great sense of disappointment. It was almost like I lost a good friend.”

He sent me another letter, he said, quote: “Our community is devastated.” You hurt my constituents, and I don’t need a civics lesson on the appropriations process or a broad critique of this program. I want to know why you canceled this grant.

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, so you are—when you go back to them and they ask. Well, did you find out why the grant got canceled—

Senator OSSOFF. Well, do you know why? I am asking you. I am asking, you canceled the grant.

Mr. ZELDIN. You can say——

Senator OSSOFF. I don't need to ask them why the grant got canceled because it was your decision. So tell me why you canceled the grant.

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, you can say—you could say, I asked the question and then decided to spend the entire five minutes cutting him off eight times in the middle of his first answer, so I was unable to get a full response.

Senator OSSOFF. Why do you not answer the question specifically and directly? Why did you cancel this grant? Why are you denying my constituents a new health clinic and new wastewater infrastructure?

Mr. ZELDIN. Do you want me to repeat anything that I said and asked——

Senator OSSOFF. No. I said, I want you to actually answer the question with specificity and not give a broad critique of this overall program or a lesson on how the appropriations process works.

Mr. ZELDIN. If you were listening to anything that I said, Senator——

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. You don't have an answer?

Mr. ZELDIN. I already answered your—say whatever you want, Senator.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Administrator, I had asked you, or we had had a discussion about the congressionally directed spending projects. You have indicated that, indeed, we have got a backlog here that we need to address. My understanding is that since fiscal year 2022, Congress had directed 2,264 CDS projects at the EPA. Only 705 have received the funding. So I think both of us would agree, you know, we have got an issue here. There is a problem.

The fiscal year 2025 CR, of course, did not include the CDS projects, so I am looking at that and saying, all right, the Agency has the balance of the fiscal year to work on catching up from this backlog of the CDSs, can you just give me a little bit of your understanding in terms of how you have directed your team to expeditiously get these projects out the door in a more timely manner?

Mr. ZELDIN. I appreciate the question, Madam Chair. The backlog goes back years, and I have directed my team to both work with the members of Congress who represent those areas, the members of Congress who requested those earmarks, to get assistance. In the case where the recipient has not been responsive, and simultaneously to try to engage as much as possible directly with the recipient to try to get the recipient to submit their paperwork; we want to completely get through the entire backlog that we inherited as quickly as possible.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Can we help you with that?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I mean, I am working with my constituents right now as we are moving forward in this year's appropriations and getting requests for CDSs. So can you perhaps either let me know who it is on your team that we need to be communicating directly to if there are snags on your end or perhaps, again, you are just not able to get in touch with the applicant?

Mr. ZELDIN. 100 percent. And as you well know, the EPA is broken down into all sorts of different program offices.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. ZELDIN. And it not be just one person for all grants, it might depend on whether the backlog might—we might be talking about a backlog inside of the Office of Water, where they need assistance from the Members of Congress, or maybe it is another office. Maybe it is the Office of Air and Radiation. We would look forward to an opportunity to work with you and your team and all Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle as much as possible to eliminate the backlog that we inherited.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good. Let us do that. I think that is a good plan. Many members here have asked about different grants, and programs, the pauses, the freezes. It has been particularly frustrating in Alaska when we hear that there has been a holdup in terms of the grant award. We have got just a limited construction season. It is just hard. And even if you are not choked by ice, you might have a barge that comes up with your materials for a project maybe once, maybe twice a season, and so it can push a project back not just months but by another season, another year, perhaps multiple years.

It has been hard to provide some clarity to our communities on which grants are going to be awarded, which are just going through the review process that you shared with us, which grants have been terminated. So I would ask if your folks could provide a list of what has actually been paused for review versus what has been terminated.

I think we have heard, for instance, on the EJ grants, that one has been perhaps more clear. But there are a lot in between, and I think it would help our communities if there was more certainty as to what has actually been terminated versus what is still in the pipeline for review. So I would ask for your help on that.

Mr. ZELDIN. Absolutely, Madam Chair. And we will continue to be distributing funding appropriated by Congress as we go through the rest of the fiscal year. That will include funds for your great, great state, and we look forward to us working with you on the process.

As you know, when the President first came in, there was an administration-wide pause that was lifted. The pause that was then instituted for EPA was more specific to some of the Inflation Reduction Act programs. There was a Clean School Bus Program concern that was raised early in the Administration when Lion Electric and their bankruptcy issue caused some questions to be asked to make sure that the concerns with Lion Electric were just specific to Lion Electric. And as it relates to the grants that were cancelled, that is something that, if you have any questions about what was included in that, we are happy to answer any individual questions.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good. Okay, we will look forward to work with you on that list.

Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you, Madam Chair. And I have four letters from communities in Oregon that I would like to enter into the record.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Without objection.

[The information follows:]



The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon
Umpqua Molalla Rogue River Kalapuya Chasta

9615 Grand Ronde Road
 Grand Ronde, Oregon 97347

Phone (503) 879-2172
 1-800-422-0232 x2172
 Fax (503) 879-2333

May 12, 2025

Senator Jeff Merkley
 531 Hart Senate Office Building
 Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Impacts of EPA Community Change Grant Termination on Rural Tribal Infrastructure,
 Public Safety, and Jobs

Dear Senator Merkley:

I am writing you to express my concern regarding the recent termination of the grant for a Resident Resilience Center (RRC), awarded to the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights (OEJECR) Environmental and Climate Justice Community Change Grants Program, Assistance Listing Number 66.616, Funding Opportunity Number EPA-R-OEJECR-OCS-23-04.

On December 5, 2024, the EPA OEJECR awarded the Tribe \$20,030,841 for the construction of the RRC, which would serve as a daily community health and wellness center and a climate-resilient community hub. The RRC would provide emergency shelter, clean energy, clean water, air filtration, and cultural and wellness services to protect and empower Tribal members during extreme weather and natural disaster events. However, the grant was terminated on May 2, 2025, delaying the project indefinitely.

The termination of this grant will have significant effects on the Tribe, Tribal members, and the surrounding community. Without the RRC, families, elders, and medically vulnerable residents will be exposed to dangerous air quality during extreme weather and natural disasters. In addition, law enforcement and emergency responders will lose a secure, coordinated base of operations. The project would have supported at least 45 jobs in construction, maintenance, security, and long-term operations. Therefore, termination of this grant inhibits job-growth in a small, rural community.

Further, the RRC supports the EPA's "Powering the Great American Comeback" initiative and aligns with the EPA's priorities. The RRC would deliver purified indoor air and potable water during smoke, heat, or storm events, protecting public health and environmental quality for over 1,200 Tribal members in a federally designated disadvantaged and remote area. In addition, the RRC would utilize American-made solar and battery storage systems, reducing long-term dependence on external utilities and enhancing local energy independence. Further, the RRC would protect American jobs by supporting domestic manufacturing and supply chains, as the

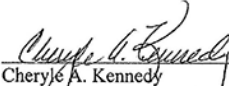
Senator Jeff Merkley
May 12, 2025
Page 2

Tribe would source American-produced construction materials, HVAC systems, solar systems, and filtration systems.

The RRC is a model project that demonstrates how efficient federal funding can be a catalyst for American industry, energy independence, and economic growth in rural communities. Termination of this grant not only erases the development of the RRC, but eliminates an opportunity for the Tribe to protect its community and support the local economy.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and thank you for your service to the State of Oregon and our community.

Very truly yours,


Cheryl A. Kennedy
Tribal Council Chairwoman



City of Chiloquin

INCORPORATED 1926
P.O. Box 196, Chiloquin, OR 97624
(541) 783-2717 • Fax (541) 783-2035

May 12, 2025

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski

Chairwoman
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley

Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: EPA Termination of City of Chiloquin Community Change Grant

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski and Ranking Member Merkley:

I am writing on behalf of the City of Chiloquin, Oregon to bring to your attention the Environmental Protection Agency's May 2, 2025, termination of our \$16.34 million EPA Community Change Grant. The grant was officially awarded and obligated to Chiloquin on December 23, 2024, and the terms and conditions do **not** allow for termination due to changing administration priorities. The termination of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity has significant consequences for our small, rural, and predominantly tribal community. We ask that this matter be considered as part of your oversight role over the EPA and its funding decisions.

The terminated grant would have funded the construction of a Community Resilience Hub and Municipal Center on a fully remediated brownfield site in the heart of Chiloquin. The site had been cleaned up using both prior EPA FY 2021 Brownfield Assessment, EPA FY 22 Brownfield Cleanup, EPA Building Blocks, and state brownfield funds in addition to private foundation contributions. The City of Chiloquin's 3-year-long effort to prepare this site for redevelopment is a textbook example of how federal, state, and private investments can be responsibly leveraged to return contaminated land to productive community use. Our project is also an award-winning project; it won the 2024 Oregon Brownfield Project of the Year and has been nominated for the 2024 Federal National Brownfield Phoenix Award.

The project is shovel-ready and backed by over \$1 million in federal and non-federal investment. Its goals are specific, practical, and aligned with current federal priorities such as enhancing rural infrastructure, supporting energy resilience, creating jobs, and protecting public health and safety. Key features of the project include:

- A secure and ADA-compliant emergency shelter and coordination center to serve residents during wildfires, earthquakes power outages, and extreme weather events.
- Consolidation of city services into a single, code-compliant facility, replacing failing infrastructure that currently exposes employees and the public to mold, asbestos, and lead-based hazards.
- Integration of renewable energy (solar), battery backup, and efficient HVAC systems to reduce operating costs and enhance energy independence.
- Strengthening of local readiness and coordination for future emergencies through community-based training and emergency communications through quarterly workshops on preparedness, first aid, and shelter operations.
- Addition of critical infrastructure such as Ham radio capabilities and redundant communication systems to ensure coordination during disasters when conventional systems fail.
- A 150-home wood stove replacement program and associated air monitoring network to reduce exposure to harmful smoke and improve respiratory health.
- Creation of short-term construction jobs and long-term facility operations and event-based employment.
- A permanent anchor for small business activity, farmers markets, and economic revitalization in our historic downtown.

This project is a strong example of what small communities can achieve with focused planning, responsible grant management, and smart federal partnerships. The City of Chiloquin followed every required protocol, acted in good faith, and had already completed requisite pre-construction work when the grant was abruptly terminated on May 2, 2025—without valid cause or explanation.

The termination not only halts a critical public safety and infrastructure project, but it also invalidates more than \$1 million in prior federal and state investment, sending a chilling message to other rural communities that are working to build resilience through proper use of federal programs. Apparently, even the most responsible and compliant use of federal programs can be undone without warning. What remains is a clean, vacant lot where a vital public facility was meant to stand—ready for construction, now indefinitely deferred. The once in a lifetime opportunity that we worked so diligently for has evaporated.

We believe this outcome undermines the intent of EPA's brownfield and infrastructure investments and warrants further examination. Thank you for your leadership and for your continued commitment to rural communities like ours.

Sincerely,



Julie Bettles
Mayor, City of Chiloquin

May 12, 2025

The Honorable Sen. Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Sen. Jeff Merkley
531 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Wyden and Merkley:

We are writing to express our deep disappointment that the Environmental Protection Agency's Community Change grant of \$19.9 million to the Columbia Gorge Early Learning & Resilience Center (CGEL&RC) was recently terminated by the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, along with other Community Change grants in Oregon and across the country. This transformative program sought to redress many years of climate injustice in America's low income communities and had the potential to galvanize employment, education, health and resilience in the three Oregon counties that border the Columbia River Gorge.

This grant was awarded and a binding contract issued by the EPA under the Biden administration but illegally terminated by the current administration. A lawsuit was brought in Rhode Island on behalf of the grantees; the outcome remains pending.

The Community Change grant would have enabled the remodeling of the underutilized Chenoweth Middle School in The Dalles, OR, as a bilingual early learning center for 200 children from infants through elementary school and as a solar-powered, grid islanded facility to serve residents of the west end of The Dalles in the case of wildfire or extreme heat events. There is no such facility available now. The remodel will cost far less than new construction and serve businesses, families, and youth from the entire region. A survey of Columbia Gorge businesses in technology, agriculture, healthcare and other fields confirmed that the lack of childcare presents a persistent barrier to employment.

The Columbia River Gorge is a state-recognized childcare desert where over 86% of parents cite the inadequacy of childcare options and 20% of our population lives below the poverty line. Lack of access to affordable, quality childcare seriously limits opportunities for education and employment in our region. This critical need cannot be addressed in a piecemeal fashion; this transformative approach will serve 200 children and create over 35 new jobs for full and part-time professional and support staff. This scale has the potential to positively impact our region's economic health and improve outcomes for students for decades to come.

The project is the result of nearly a decade of planning including a comprehensive feasibility study, cooperative efforts with regional businesses including Google and Insitu, local governments and elected officials, non profits, the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District, North Wasco School District 21 and Columbia Gorge Community College.

By partnering with Columbia Gorge Community College, the CGEL&RC would have become a training facility for the college's Early Childhood Education program, offering practicum opportunities for onsite learning, internships and pathways to employment. Thus, the CGEL&RC would have helped train the professional workforce needed at family-based and other childcare centers throughout the state.

Project Finance

With the Community Change grant, the project was over 73% funded and the intention was to complete construction documents and permits and break ground during the summer of 2025. The project had already received support through ARPA funding and an EPA toxic materials abatement grant. A grant was pending with the State of Oregon for \$2M from HB 3005 for childcare facilities with the expectation of a second request in the fall as well as a request for CIP support moved to the FY2026 budget. Support from private foundations was also pending with The Ford Family Foundation, Roundhouse Foundation and others knowledgeable about the project and expecting to receive applications for grants. With these sources of support, the project would be fully funded and the CGEL&RC's pro forma operating budget demonstrates its ability to manage to a balanced annual budget with a budgeted maintenance reserve.

Without the Community Change grant, however, the project is untenable and will not be able to move forward.

We would be grateful if you would join with us and other Community Change grantees to encourage the EPA to reconsider their decision to terminate these legally contracted grants. The funds, entitled during the previous administration, have the capacity to leverage their investment many times over by creating new, family-wage jobs, supporting businesses, and building robust, healthy communities.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,
Signed by:

Dana L. Pedersen

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May 12, 2025

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior Environment and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski and Ranking Member Merkley,

The termination of this Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant interrupts life-saving education and prevention work to reduce deaths and illness from severe heat and wildfire smoke.

For almost all of its recorded history, the people living in this temperate rainforest of Oregon experienced no heat deaths. In 2021, a single June weekend heat wave killed 69 people, mostly older adults living alone without air conditioning. Multnomah County has declared states of emergency eight times since then because of extreme heat. At the same time, air pollution, including from deadly wildfire smoke, has become a regular, multi-seasonal threat.

In 2023, Multnomah County was awarded a competitive EPA Environmental Justice Government-to-Government grant. The lawfully executed three-year assistance agreement (52-02J57501) went into effect on March 1, 2024. The grant project is focused on the Rockwood neighborhood where the cities of Portland and Gresham meet. The Rockwood neighborhood grapples with some of the lowest incomes, fewest trees, and most asphalt in the state. Because of this, during severe heat people experience temperatures up to 17 degrees higher than their neighbors, and higher rates of air pollution.

The project invested \$338,000 through community grants in four program areas:

1. **Community Health Worker (CHW) training.** The County contracted with two community organizations to develop and deliver a curriculum for CHWs on climate resilience, helping prepare the community for extreme heat and wildfire smoke.

2. **Workforce development through community-led air monitoring.** The County contracted with a local foundation to train youth to build and deploy air monitoring equipment in the Rockwood neighborhood. Training included data analysis to inform decision-making.
3. **Mitigating health risks from heat.** The County contracted with a non-profit to organize tree plantings in Rockwood, and to nurture the trees in their first few years after planting.
4. **Resilient housing investments.** Through the County's Weatherization program, the project provided incentives for low-income households to replace aging, inefficient heating and cooling systems with high-efficiency heat pumps, as well as upgrades to indoor air filtration systems that reduce the risk of respiratory illness.

On March 21, 2025, County staff received a letter from the EPA providing notification that the grant was terminated effective March 11, 2025. The County immediately stopped work on the project and directed contractors to stop incurring costs. In the first year of the grant, the project was on pace to meet or exceed nearly all of the performance targets. However, this termination put a halt to the work and as a consequence, Rockwood will not see the following benefits:

- To date the project has trained 26 Community Health Workers. The project would have funded training for an additional 49.
- To date the project has engaged 111 youth in workforce training, building 45 air sensors and installing 10. The project would have funded an additional two years of paid training for youth and installed an additional 35 air monitors.
- To date the project has engaged 177 volunteers to plant 25 trees in the neighborhood. The project would have funded an additional 75 trees to be planted.
- To date the project has installed energy efficient HVAC upgrades in 23 homes, with 39% of these households being home to residents over age 60. The project would have funded upgrades in an additional 114 households.

In addition to the foregone benefits, the grant termination has disrupted the County's relationship with trusted community partners. The County had to cancel contracts with four community non-profits, which jeopardized its position as a reliable partner.

Multnomah County is ready to deliver the remaining project benefits to the community if the funding is restored. Doing so would create immediate benefits in the community by educating and preparing those people most at risk, lowering utility bills, reducing exposure to extreme heat, improving air quality, and preparing youth to launch careers in a growing professional field.

We respectfully urge your support in restoring this critical funding. Multnomah County is prepared to resume this work immediately to deliver the promised health, environmental, and economic benefits to one of our most impacted communities. Thank you for your leadership and continued commitment to environmental justice and community resilience.

Sincerely,



Jessica Vega Pederson
Multnomah County Chair

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you so much. So the City of Chiloquin is a city of under 1,000 people in rural Oregon, and they had remediated a brownfield site, winning the award for the Oregon Brownfield Project of the Year, and had worked very hard and realized when you only have 1,000 people, it is pretty hard to even write grants, let alone win one. So they were very excited about their grant for a municipal center.

Not only would it have been city offices but also an emergency shelter. It is a community that is affected by wildfire smoke more years than not, and an emergency readiness center to respond to emergency with upgraded communications. So they had a grant awarded and obligated that you cancelled, and can you explain to the people of Chiloquin why this grant was canceled?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, and I know Senator Murray asked about a specific grant, Senator Ossoff, asked about a specific grant, you are asking about a specific grant. I don't have all of the details on every single grant in front of me. However, I would have no hesitation whatsoever to be able to have a follow-up conversation, to the extent you are interested, that Senator Murray is interested, that Senator Ossoff is interested, to go through all of those individual details. And it is possible that the issue that might be present on a particular request is something that can get fixed, that can get addressed, as it relates to difference of administrative policy priorities from one administration to the next.

I went through a bunch of different Alaska grants before we were here today, and I found that there were different—that the grants might have an aspect that isn't consistent with this administration's policy priorities, but other aspects of it were. So we can work through that.

Senator MERKLEY. So this is a grant that was both awarded and obligated. How does a community proceed to plan, because they are contracting for design, they are contracting for construction. The grant has already been awarded, you unawarded it. It seems to me like once it has been obligated, that should be kind of like, okay, well, we will take those priorities to the next set of grants rather than undoing the existing ones.

So I think that is particularly upsetting to the rhythm of how communities can proceed with confidence if a grant that has already been awarded and obligated can be snatched back.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Senator. I would encourage—and I am going to be, you know, in front of House Approps tomorrow, and next week Senate EPW, which you serve on, and House E and C Subcommittee. And my message would be for all of your colleagues that if anybody wants to ask about a specific grant, I would encourage them to reach out to us right now, as opposed to waiting until we are here for a Q&A, and I am getting asked about a very specific grant, as opposed to your office contacting us and saying: Hey, by the way, when we are at the hearing, I would like to ask you all sorts of very detailed questions about this one specific grant, if you would not mind bringing it. Because then, in that case, Senator, I would be standing here ready to answer a thousand questions about every individual grant.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, there was a kind of a procedural question embedded in that, which is, if a grant has been already obligated, and so here the community has contracted for design, perhaps for construction, isn't it not kind of deeply inappropriate to then undo that at that point?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, if it is not consistent with administration priorities, depending on how the program was appropriated by Congress and depending on what the details are of that individual grant, that grant can be subject to cancellation.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay. I will follow up with a question on specifically why these grants were funded—or unfunded. The second one is from a plan for a community health project to increase tree planting in a heat kind of dome section of a very poor part of Gresham, Oregon, and air conditioning and space to address respiratory illness. The community, there is the philosophy, when you say it is inconsistent with the philosophy of the Government, is the incoming Government against addressing air conditioning to address heat, emergencies, or spaces to address respiratory illness during smoke emergencies?

Mr. ZELDIN. You are asking about a specific grant. I would need the details of that particular grant to be able to answer—

Senator MERKLEY. Actually, I was asking about whether the philosophy, is that the philosophy of the incoming administration, that you are against—you may have undone this for who knows what reason, but are you opposed to tree planting and spaces to address respiratory emergencies?

Mr. ZELDIN. Tree planting is fantastic. We would encourage more of it, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, if you look at these individual grants, which I am sure there are so many of them, I know that they were done with kind of a huge swath of cancellation, but if you look at them and go, well, there is nothing about this that we oppose, we like to have community health centers built, is there a possibility you will restore those grants?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, over the course of the rest of the fiscal year, it is our intent to continue to be spending money that was appropriated by Congress to fulfill our obligations and to follow the law, and it very well will end up including grants that were canceled.

The way that the grant may be finalized under new terms might not include whatever the particular aspect was that led to its cancellation the first time, but I am sure that there is going to be many examples of grants that will end up going back out the door just not without—

Senator MERKLEY. Yes, possibly, you may be restoring grants, if I just summarize what you just said?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes.

Senator MERKLEY. Yes?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes.

Senator MERKLEY. The third one is a community health center in the Town of the Grand Ronde, and to have a place to coordinate national—response to natural disasters. I know you are not going to give a response to this specifically, but in philosophy, it is not that the administration is against community health centers?

Mr. ZELDIN. I remember during the first Trump term, that was something that there was an increase of funding to community health centers. That was a subject of legislation. I remember because I was in the House at the time.

Senator MERKLEY. And the fourth one is an early learning center, and the administration is not against early learning centers, in philosophy?

Mr. ZELDIN. I have not heard of any administration, or any Member of Congress, or otherwise, being against something like that.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, these are important grants. I think there may be elements of each of these grants that you don't particularly like, like they are going to put solar panels on the roof, or the wording of the grant used the word "resilience" or said "we are responding to heat emergencies from climate change." I am sure there are words you don't like, but I hope when you review these grants, and you have stated your intention to spend the money in these categories by the end of the fiscal year, which is only months away, that you will examine these.

I will get you a list for Oregon. I think in these small communities, it is so hard to even write a grant, and it is such a victory when they win a grant and say, we can finally solve a major community problem.

And I know I am over my time, Madam Chair, but I will close just with this note. Because you have responded to the question of earmarks, or congressionally directed spending on the Revolving Water Fund, so in Oregon, we call these community-initiated projects. The communities say, here is our very top need, and will you fight to get us help because we cannot afford this water treatment on the front end, or wastewater in the background.

And I think very similarly, I think it is in Alaska communities say, here is our priority, Senator Murkowski is fighting for them. I think that is kind of the best arrangement. It sounded to me like you didn't like the idea of us fighting for the top priorities for our communities, but I think it is absolutely our responsibility. Better to have the communities say they want their priority is, and us fight for them, than some bureaucratic decision made 3,000 miles away, or further away from Alaska.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Senator, there are so many great examples of what is called congressionally directed spending, earmarks where it is a member——

Senator MERKLEY. Community-initiated projects.

Mr. ZELDIN. Community-initiated projects.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

Mr. ZELDIN. Where a member of Congress, House, Senate, is fighting for something that is filled with merit, purely, it is a great project that is going to have extremely positive outcomes. There are many of those examples, and that is something that I am not here to say, you know, generally encouraging or discouraging. That is a decision for Congress to make as to whether or not and how much to do it. My job is to make sure that the money gets out the door when Congress does. I don't want to use the wrong word "congressionally" not congressionally-directed.

Senator MERKLEY. Community-initiated projects.

Mr. ZELDIN. Congressionally-initiated funds. We will make sure that the money gets out the door, Senator. The point as it relates to the description, the notes in the skinny budget as it relates to SRF, is just the concern of how that pot of money has been used, with regards to these funds.

With that being said, I am sure that there are many different examples, many examples of what was described there being good outcomes for a particular community. A very thoughtful congressionally initiated—community-initiated funding.

Senator MERKLEY. Community-initiated projects.

Mr. ZELDIN. So I was used to the term "earmark" when I was in Congress, but we call it something else now.

Senator MERKLEY. The reason I don't love "congressionally directed" is it is not some invention of us up here that we just say: Oh, what do we want? No, it is what have our communities identify they want. So I have been trying to get the Appropriations Committee to change its terminology to reflect what is actually happening, and I think it puts it in a strong light.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So I want to just follow on Senator Merkley's comments here, because the operating plan for fiscal year 2025 we have received, it is very much in line with the previous year's funding level for each line item. There is a lot of changes that have been discussed, but it sounds like you are committing to spending the funds as delineated in the Agency's spend plans.

And I guess my ask to you is, if that is not going to be the case, that the committee, or the subcommittee—excuse me—receive a reprogramming request, so that we basically follow the process of procedure here, if in fact we are not doing—the Agency is not doing the spend out as we have anticipated, as these small communities understand them.

I just have two very quick follow-ons. One is very easy for you because we have discussed it at length, but it is a significant issue in my state when it comes to contaminated lands. The history that I have shared with you of Alaskan Natives receiving their settlement of lands being conveyed by the Federal Government, and basically, they were conveyed tainted lands, lands that were contami-

nated by various actions of Federal agencies, whether it is the land managers or the Department of Defense.

And so we have made some good progress with EPA. And believe me, this is not EPA's fault or liability for the contamination, it is the Federal Government's, but what we have learned is that the EPA is uniquely qualified to help us solve this issue. Over the past couple years, there has been roughly \$20 million in funding that has been directed to contaminated lands, and the agencies have been doing some really good work.

I just need your commitment that we are going to continue with this. \$20 million, unfortunately, doesn't even get the first project cleanup. We know that these are expensive, but it is an obligation. It is a liability of our government, and we owe it, whether it is to Alaskan Natives as conveyance of their settlement, or to others. And I know that when we are talking super funds, brownfields, contaminated lands, we just have so much work to do here. So know that you have cooperation on my level here.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, Madam Chairwoman, I look forward to visiting over the course of the next couple weeks, being in Alaska, might be able to have the opportunity to hear about, see about—see this firsthand. And I will, with regards to all appropriations, make sure that we are fulfilling our obligations under the law. So if Congress appropriates the funds, we will make sure that it is spent.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Very good. PFAS is something that we talk a lot about in Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. Last month you announced that EPA will, quote, "Tackle PFAS from all of EPA's program offices, advancing research and testing, stopping PFAS from getting into drinking water systems, holding polluters accountable, and providing certainty for passive receivers." You said this was just the beginning of the work that EPA is going to do to tackle PFAS, which I certainly appreciate, and I know most everyone up here does.

Can you tell me whether the operating plan and the skinny budget requests, whether they actually reflect this kind of full forward push on PFAS, and whether it includes the \$10 billion that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding provided to take on Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination? I am looking at this skinny budget, and I am saying, good for you, let us go on PFAS. But I am worried about making sure that we are actually budgeting to do so.

And I am also worried about whether or not with the RIFs that we have seen to date, as well as what is anticipated about perhaps an additional fork in the road, whether we are going to be able to do the job. So again, this is something where you are going to have good support from people on this committee for the initiative. But do you have the budget, and do you have the people?

Mr. ZELDIN. Yeah, Senator, we are actually adding people into this effort inside of the Office of Water. As you noted, this spans multiple program offices at EPA. A lot of the PFAS work is done inside of the Office of Water, the reorganization announcement that we made a couple weeks ago includes boosting that effort inside of the Office of Water.

The press release from April 28th that you referenced included a lot of different actions that we plan on taking, and everything

that the Agency has announced is already factored into the skinny budget that is before the committee today.

Senator MURKOWSKI. And so let me just ask more directly, whether or not you are concerned that the RIF or the deferred resignation is going to impact your ability to execute, whether it is on the PFAS side, or contaminated lands, or any number of issues that you have heard here from members?

Mr. ZELDIN. No, Madam Chair. This is a very important priority of ours at EPA. When I was in Congress, I was a member of the PFAS Task Force. I had voted for the PFAS Action Act when I was a member of the House. I represented the district that had all sorts of different PFAS contamination issues. This is something that, in many respects, started during President Trump's first term in office and has continued to progress since. And we are going to make sure that we are hitting the ground running.

That is included in the April 28th announcement. But as we noted in that announcement, those are just some of the many decisions and important work that are before us. It is a very high priority.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So you have spoken to the adequacy to meet the PFAS mission. Are you concerned about your numbers EPA-wide to do your overall mission, not just specific to PFAS, but with everything else that you are looking at? Because the reduction in staffing is very significant, you have got to admit that. And so you have got a big task, and we want you to be able to execute on that. So I just want to hear from you whether you have any concerns about your staffing levels right now?

Mr. ZELDIN. Madam Chair, we are going to fulfill all statutory obligations. One of the things that was a surprise to me coming into the position was just how many people who are employees at the Agency were not working on any statutory obligation at all. And I also want to say that there are a lot of amazing, dedicated employees at EPA. The American public might feel disconnected from Agency employees who might be working in Washington, D.C., but there are a lot of people who have been there for a long time.

They believe in the Agency mission, they work hard every single day. One of the reforms we brought in coming in is ending COVID-era remote work. And it is great to hear noise in the building, to see the foot traffic, and to see people being productive and collaborative. But if anyone out there was tuning in and they don't know what the Agency looks like, it is filled with a lot of amazing, dedicated workers who believe in the Agency's mission, and we are going to work hard to make the public proud.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, I am glad that you have acknowledged your workforce because I think you do have people who are good public servants. They are proud of the work they do, and the work that they do has value, and we want to recognize that.

I know our second vote is coming to the end.

Senator Merkley, do you have anything quick?

Senator MERKLEY. Just very quickly, I want to accentuate my concern, following on your concern of the employees. By the rough count we have now, we lost about 400 people of probationary staff who were fired within their first year, 560 in the first round of de-

ferred resignations, 180 in the DEIA who have been rified. That is 1,129 deferred resignations. Second round, 1,800 have opt-ins, so now we are up to almost 3,000.

Office of R&D rumored that they are reduced to 500 positions, which would be a loss of 1,300 additional. So now we are at 4,300. I will just point out that for two decades the level of employment at EPA was about 17,000. Right now it is about 14,000. So subtracting the numbers I just shared, we are talking about more than 4,000 reduction from that. Meanwhile, there are all sorts of programs that have been established over time.

This Congress has said we want to undertake things like addressing the environmental laws, and the fuel economy standards, and the Innovation Manufacturing Act, and updates to the Clean Water Act, and updates to Safe Drinking Water, so you have all these additional responsibilities, but it sounds like you are aiming to reduce the employment to around 10,000, and therefore it raises doubts that this work can really get done. Do you share those concerns? Or should we be concerned?

Mr. ZELDIN. Senator, when the President's full budget comes out in the coming weeks, there will be more information as it relates to what you are raising on the number. The number that you just cited, though, is lower than the actual number. So from that respect, again, I know we are here to talk about the skinny budget because that is what has been released, and we are still waiting for the release of the full budget. Some of the numbers that you gave were accurate, some weren't and—

Senator MERKLEY. Well, just fill us in, you aim—well, just fill us in. What are you aiming for? You are aiming for 10,000, 11,000?

Mr. ZELDIN. The way that the—the right answer is going to be based off of, as we go through the reorg, each office is going to be identifying how much that office needs, how much each region needs to be able to fulfill our statutory obligations, to fulfill our mission, and to power the great American comeback. Each office, when they have their number, it all gets added up, and that is the right-sized number of—

Senator MERKLEY. So we will get the—we will get the number later, is what you are saying?

Mr. ZELDIN. Right. I am just filling you in on the process of how we are going to arrive at that. We are in a process of going through the reorganization now. That is how we will arrive at that final total number, which is higher than the number today.

Senator MERKLEY. All right. Well, we look forward to those details. You mentioned the PFAS mission, and EPA just announced, and so therefore you are announcing, I guess, that your plans to weaken the rule curbing “forever chemicals”. And what are those chemicals? Those chemicals are PFAS, originally covering six PFAS contaminants including PFOA and PFOS. I am concerned that really, if this information, which just came out yesterday, sounds like it is at odds with your commitment to tackling PFAS. I am concerned about the numbers. I know it sounds like we are going to learn a lot more when we have a full budget and a full vision laid out before us, we can have a more detailed conversation.

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, Senator, I don't know if you are quoting a news story, and it might not come as a shock to you, but sometimes

the news says stuff that is not accurate, that is not what the Agency announced.

And as it relates to PFOA and PFOS, you said that we were weakening the standard, and that is actually the opposite of what the Agency actually announced. We were keeping the standard, and there was an issue as it relates to the four other chemicals, and that is something that we are going to be going through a process. But that doesn't mean that it gets weaker. The number might end up getting lower, not higher.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay.

Mr. ZELDIN. So when you go through a process and we follow the law, at the end of it, the final Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCL) might be a lower number, not a higher number.

Senator MERKLEY. Madam Chair, I will just submit for the record this article from the Washington Post titled, "EPA Plans to Weaken the Rule Curbing Forever Chemicals in Drinking Water."

Senator MURKOWSKI. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

EPA will weaken rule curbing 'forever chemicals' in drinking water

The Environmental Protection Agency said it will reconsider drinking water standards for four chemicals that have been linked to a range of illnesses.

May 14, 2025 at 11:42 a.m. EDT

By Amudalat Ajasa

The Environmental Protection Agency announced Wednesday that it plans to rescind and reconsider limits on four "forever chemicals" under a landmark drinking water standard implemented last year by President Joe Biden.

The drinking water rules were adopted as part of the Biden administration's efforts to limit public exposure to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), hazardous chemicals linked to a range of serious illnesses. The original rule covered six common PFAS contaminants, including PFOA, a known human carcinogen, and PFOS, a likely carcinogen.

The EPA estimates that more than 158 million Americans are exposed to PFAS through their drinking water.

The agency plans to maintain current rules for PFOA and PFOS, though it will extend the deadline for compliance from 2029 to 2031.

In its announcement, EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin said the changes will "protect Americans from PFOA and PFOS in their drinking water" while providing "common-sense flexibility in the form of additional time for compliance."

The EPA did not provide additional comment, but during a congressional hearing Wednesday, Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) pressed Zeldin on whether the agency would "weaken" PFAS standards.

"That is not accurate," Zeldin said in response. "That is not what the agency announced."

The EPA chief added that the agency will kick off a lengthy process for revising the PFAS limits. "But that doesn't mean that it gets weaker," he said. "The number might end up going lower, not higher."

The agency's action follows the release by the White House in March of a 36-page "National Strategy to End the Use of Paper Straws" that detailed the dangers of PFAS, which some paper straws contain. It said the chemicals are "harmful to human health, and they have been linked to harms affecting reproductive health, developmental delays in children, cancer, hormone imbalance, obesity, and other dangerous health conditions."

PFAS are a large class of persistent chemicals that repel grease, water, oil and heat, used to make a wide array of consumer and industrial products. Scientists have found these chemicals in the blood of almost every American and have detected the compounds in remote regions of the planet, such as Antarctica.

The regulations adopted last year gave the 66,000 public water systems in the United States until 2029 to comply with the new standards. Under the rule, the maximum contamination level for PFOA and PFOS was set at 4 parts per trillion. Three other compounds — PFHxS, PFNA and GenX — were limited to 10 parts per trillion. In addition, the water standard required utilities to use a “hazard index” to monitor a mixture of the chemicals, as well as a fourth, PFBS.

In June, trade associations representing water utilities filed suit against the EPA, challenging the science and data underlying the drinking water standard and its timetable for meeting it. According to the agency’s estimates, the standard would cost utilities about \$1.5 billion a year.

Under the agency’s new plan, the regulations covering PFHxS, PFNA, GenX and PFBS will be rescinded and reconsidered. The agency plans to begin a new rulemaking process in the fall and to issue the new rule next spring. The agency also said it plans to start a program called PFAS OUT to “share resources, tools, funding and technical assistance to help utilities meet the federal drinking water standards.”

Erik Olson, the senior strategic director for health at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group that is a party to the lawsuit, said the Safe Drinking Water Act’s “anti-backsliding” provision bars the agency from repealing or weakening the drinking water standard.

“The law is very clear that the EPA can’t repeal or weaken the drinking water standard. Any effort to do so will clearly violate what Congress has required for decades,” Olson said. “It shows that this administration doesn’t really care about protecting people’s drinking water from toxic forever chemicals that endanger the health of over 100 million Americans.”

Water utilities praised the move.

“EPA has done the right thing for rural and small communities by delaying implementation of the PFAS rule,” said Matthew Holmes, CEO of the National Rural Water Association, a trade group, in the announcement. “This commonsense decision provides the additional time that water system managers need to identify affordable treatment technologies and make sure they are on a sustainable path to compliance.”

Alan Roberson, executive director of the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators, said that “EPA’s proposed extension of the compliance date and increased technical assistance will address the number of systems that would be out of compliance in 2029 due to not being able complete all of these tasks on time.”

The American Chemistry Council, an industry trade group, said the Biden-era regulation was not consistent with the state of the science and imposed steep costs on water utilities.

"EPA's actions reflect efforts to address the concerns of water utilities and local governments, focus on national drinking water priorities, minimize the impact on water bills, and ensure consistency with the requirements of the Safe Drinking Water Act," the ACC said in a statement.

Linda Birnbaum, a former director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, said the agency's decision to remove restrictions on the known substitutions for PFOS and PFOA was concerning.

"It's too bad. We know these chemicals are dangerous. We know their adverse health effects. The more we study them, the more problems we face," Birnbaum said. "If anything, the science is stronger today than it was a year or two years ago."

GenX has been linked to kidney and liver toxicity, immune and development effects and cancer in rats, according to an EPA toxicity assessment.

Experts say that in the absence of federal regulations, more emphasis will be placed on the states to safeguard drinking water from PFAS pollution.

More than two dozen states have introduced almost 200 bills this year to address local PFAS issues. Lawmakers in North Carolina, for example, have proposed a bill that would require PFAS manufacturers to cover the cost of cleaning up drinking water contaminated by GenX and other chemicals.

"Our bipartisan bill specifically tackles GenX, one of the compounds which will now have looser regulation," North Carolina state Rep. Robert Reives (D) said in an email. "I am disappointed but not surprised by the prospect of these rescissions. We know these forever chemicals are toxic to humans."

Emily Donovan, who lives near Wilmington, North Carolina, an area affected by the release of GenX into the Cape Fear River, said that communities will bear the brunt of the EPA's decision.

"The idea that they want to rescind and reconsider GenX is a victory for chemical companies," said Donovan, who co-founded a grassroots advocacy group called Clean Cape Fear. "This isn't a win for American public health."

Maxine Joselow contributed to this report.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you for your testimony, but we will look forward to a lot more information as we have a full budget and a full reorganization plan.

Mr. ZELDIN. Yes, thank you. And Madam Chair, I would encourage the committee to look at the actual announcement from EPA as opposed to The Washington Post.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We will have further discussion about so many of these issues, the reorganization, what we are seeing with the grants.

But I appreciate, Administrator Zeldin, you appearing before the committee, responding to our questions.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

We will hold the record open until May 21st for additional questions from members and would look forward to your responses to those as well.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO HON. LEE ZELDIN

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO

Question. In March, your office announced plans for 31 deregulatory actions across three major areas. More broadly, the President has issued an Executive Order on “Reducing Anti-Competitive Regulatory Barriers,” and the Office of Management and Budget is soliciting input on deregulation. Can you provide information on how EPA plans to engage with stakeholders subject to EPA regulations to evaluate opportunities to streamline overly burdensome regulations?

The New Chemicals Division performs a critical role in reviewing submissions so that new chemicals can be evaluated with respect to approval for commercial use (e.g., utilized in domestic manufacturing of high tech). However, the Agency has been encountering chronic challenges with completing reviews within the statutory period of 90 days. Can you assure us that EPA is properly resourcing the New Chemical Divisions to ensure that reviews are completed within the statutory period?

Answer. EPA agrees that the TSCA new chemical review process is critical for advancing innovative chemistries for all sectors of our manufacturing economy. To improve the efficiency of the new chemical review process, a functioning and stable IT system is necessary. The previous Administration publicly acknowledged that systems were either not functioning or, at times, completely shut down which paralyzed the agency’s ability to review these important submissions. EPA is grateful to President Trump and Congress for passing the continuing resolution which includes \$17 million to help improve the IT systems used in the TSCA program, especially in our review of new chemicals. We will ensure that this money goes to support improvements for our IT infrastructure.

We have pivoted staff that were working on nonregulatory programs to assist in the New Chemicals Division and support efforts regarding the backlog. We are analyzing our processes and procedures to identify process improvements to shorten the review period for new chemicals, eliminate the use of unrealistic assumptions and provide some regulatory certainty for submitters.

Additionally, on May 2, 2025, EPA announced the next phase of organizational improvements to better provide clean air, water, and land for all Americans. This action is part of a larger, comprehensive restructuring effort to help EPA fulfill its statutory obligations and deliver on its mission to protect human health and the environment. The reorganization will bring much needed efficiencies to incorporate science into EPA’s statutory programs. The plans include specific changes for OCSPP that will strengthen and build the agency’s chemical safety programs, including the New Chemicals Program. Adding additional expertise to the TSCA program will help ensure we’re using the best science and latest tools to really drive our programs into the future—reviewing chemicals more efficiently, providing better protections for consumers and workers; and increasing innovation and economic growth.

Question. There continues to be a lack of viable alternatives to PFAS chemicals. PFAS are used in critical industries, including many in the national security sector. Yet, the proposed budget makes significant cuts to EPA’s Office of Research and Development, the scientific research arm of the agency that provides funding to finding alternatives to these chemicals.

What steps are you taking to ensure that critical research in PFAS alternatives is not impacted by these cuts?

Answer. Understanding the characteristics of PFAS chemicals is essential to the ability to identify appropriate alternatives. As noted in Administrator Zeldin’s April 28, 2025, announcement on EPA’s efforts to address PFAS, EPA is committed to implementing a PFAS testing strategy that includes analysis of existing information on PFAS, as well as generation of critical data either through collaborative efforts with internal and external stakeholders, or by using test order authority under section 4 of the Toxic Substances Control Act. For example, EPA is evaluating how groups of structurally similar PFAS behave to help identify features that may relate to their hazardous characteristics.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, granting West Virginia’s state primacy of Class VI permitting was a significant step in allowing my state to lead on carbon capture and storage projects. As you know, state primacy is a critical tool to faster permitting decisions by removing bureaucratic hurdles in DC and allowing the states who know their natural resources best to lead on permitting. State primacy will greatly improve the deployment of CCUS projects across the country. According to EPA, eight states are pursuing Class VI primacy, and we want to make sure EPA has the resources and ability to process these applications in a timely manner. How is

EPA utilizing its resources to expeditiously process and approve state primacy applications? How is the agency working with states in the primacy application process and do you support efforts to process these applications in a timely manner?

Answer. EPA appreciates the funding Congress has provided for the Underground Injection Control program. Consistent with Pillars 2 and 3 of the Powering the Great American Comeback Initiative, granting a state primacy for Class VI Wells under the Safe Drinking Water Act bolsters American energy dominance and expands cooperative federalism while recognizing that states are best positioned to protect their underground sources of drinking water. One of my first decisions as Administrator was to charge the Office of Water with fast-tracking UIC primacy and permitting. As a result, on May 15, 2025, proposed to approve the State of Arizona's request to oversee Safe Drinking Water Act permitting for all underground injection wells in the state.

EPA is also committed to ensuring that all UIC permits, and primacy packages are processed in a timely manner. To effectuate this commitment, EPA has established a Tiger Team to ensure every efficiency possible is utilized in issuing these important statutory functions as well as addressing the significant backlog that formed under the prior administration.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, under the previous Administration, EPA moved at a glacial pace on individual Class VI permit applications. If the U.S. is going to lead on CCUS deployment, which supports our energy security and dominance, EPA has to process these applications in a timely manner. I know you share this view, and I credit you for the actions you've taken to-date to improve the permit review process. I appreciate that the EPA under your leadership is not going to make the same mistakes of the previous Administration. According to EPA, there are 170 well applications currently under review and that number will grow as investments in CCUS projects continue to increase. What steps are you taking to ensure that existing applications and new permit applications are processed in a timely manner? What do you think were the primary causes of delays in processing individual permit applications under the previous Administration and how can we overcome them? Please let us know how this Committee can aid you and your agency in providing timely review of permit applications.

Answer. Consistent with Pillars 2 and 3 of the Powering the Great American Comeback Initiative, permitting Class VI Wells under the Safe Drinking Water Act bolsters American energy dominance while promoting job creation and economic opportunity. One of my first decisions as Administrator was to charge the Office of Water with fast-tracking UIC primacy and permitting. As a result, on April 7, 2025, issued final Class VI permits to Oxy Low Carbon Ventures LLC for three wells for geologic sequestration of carbon dioxide in Ector County, Texas. EPA is committed to approving permits as quickly as possible and ensuring they meet requirements to protect drinking water sources.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR DEB FISCHER

Question. The U.S. rendering industry diverts 54 billion pounds of animal byproduct from the landfill each year. They help recycle unwanted animal materials as well as used cooking oil and transform them into ingredients for dozens of products including fuels, pet food, fertilizer, and other industrial uses. Since the 1990s, rendering has been included in EPA's ranking of food recovery strategies to reduce waste, previously called the Food Recovery Hierarchy. The last administration removed rendering from EPA's new ranking systems, now called Wasted Food Scale, with no scientific evidence or reasoning provided for the change. State and local governments as well as the private sector model their food waste strategies, incentives, and programs after the Wasted Food Scale. Can you commit to looking at restoring rendering to the nation's food recovery and waste strategy?

Answer. Yes. Dedicated EPA employees are exploring a potential path forward for including aspects of rendering into the Wasted Food Scale and the National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics. We will continue to work with the industry to develop the needed data to support this effort.

Question. During the hearing, you stated that a congressional solution on year-round sale of E15 would be the most durable and easiest solution to this issue. Is it accurate that through regulatory means tried by President Trump in 2019 and through emergency summertime petitions, the year-round sale of E15 has effectively been the status quo?

Answer. Yes. EPA's action to extend the 1-psi waiver to E15 in 2019 allowed year-round E15 sales beginning that summer. That rule remained in effect through the

summer of 2021. Since 2022, EPA has issued emergency fuel waivers that have allowed continued E15 sales in the summer months.

Question. Would a legislative fix be more efficient and effective use of EPA resources?

Answer. Yes. A legislative solution would provide the greatest certainty for EPA and industry.

Question. Crop protection tools are critical for Nebraskan farmers to produce food safely, efficiently, and cost-effectively for the nation. When evaluating pesticide safety, can EPA commit to: Seeking input from USDA and impacted stakeholders when designing pilot projects or mitigation actions related to pesticides on listed species and their designated habitat?

Answer. Yes, EPA remains committed to working with and seeking input from USDA and impacted stakeholders as EPA begins to implement any necessary mitigations to protect listed species and critical habitat (if designated) into registration and registration review decisions. EPA meets regularly with USDA's Office of Pest Management Policy (OPMP) as well as with grower, state, and industry groups to discuss issues of particular concern from these different perspectives.

Question. Ensure that any epidemiological study or data considered by the Agency for regulatory decision making in the pesticide review process meets existing data quality requirements and can be verified and independently reviewed by the Agency?

Answer. EPA strives to use high-quality studies to support its regulatory decisions for pesticides. Studies are subjected to robust, independent evaluations by EPA to ensure data quality and the utility of the data to inform regulatory decisions based on current standards. This includes taking into consideration rigorous guidelines that have been established for how testing must be conducted, as well as existing guidance on how to evaluate and incorporate relevant and reliable data.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MIKE ROUNDS

Question. Administrator Zeldin, I was encouraged to see the Trump administration extend the MATS compliance deadline for coal-fired power plants to 2029. Will you consider supporting additional measures to provide regulatory relief for these facilities?

Answer. Yes. EPA submitted a draft proposed reconsideration of the 2024 MATS rule to OMB.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, States such as California are attempting to override the EPA by imposing additional, stringent regulations on pesticides-creating a significant burden for agriculture. Do you share my concern that conflicting State and local labeling requirements jeopardize the future of pesticide use in American agriculture?

Answer. EPA and States work collaboratively to avoid conflict on labeling to ensure growers have clear and consistent directions for using pesticides. Core labeling requirements for all pesticides sold in the United States are mandated under the Federal Insecticide Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) and its implementing regulations. The EPA reviews and approves all pesticide labels before they can be sold, ensuring they contain the necessary information for use that will not cause unreasonable adverse effects. States can enact their own regulations that are stricter than the EPA's, but they cannot impose labeling or packaging requirements that are in addition to or are different from those required by FIFRA.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, how can the EPA address PFAS contamination while making certain that local water operators are not unduly burdened by the regulatory response?

Answer. EPA is committed to addressing Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in drinking water while following the law and the science. On May 14, 2025, EPA announced the agency will keep the current National Primary Drinking Water Regulations (NPDWR) for perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS), which set nationwide limits for these "forever chemicals" in drinking water. EPA also announced its intent to extend compliance deadlines for PFOA and PFOS, establish a Federal exemption framework, and initiate enhanced outreach to water systems, especially in rural and small communities, through EPA's new PFAS OUTreach Initiative (PFAS OUT). This action will help address the most significant compliance challenges EPA has heard from public water systems, members of Congress, and other stakeholders, while supporting actions to protect the American people from certain PFAS in drinking water.

On May 14, 2025, EPA also announced its intent to rescind the regulations and reconsider the regulatory determinations for PFHxS, PFNA, HFPO-DA (commonly known as GenX), and the Hazard Index mixture of these three plus PFBS to ensure that the determinations and any resulting drinking water regulation follow the legal process laid out in the Safe Drinking Water Act.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Question. In 2005, Congress enacted the Energy Policy Act. Section 131 of the Act amends Section 324 of the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, and codifies the ENERGY STAR program “to identify and promote energy-efficient products and buildings in order to reduce energy consumption, improve energy security, and reduce pollution through voluntary labeling of, or other forms of communication about, products and buildings that meet the highest energy conservation standards.” 42 U.S.C. § 6294a(a). The Act requires, among other provisions, that the Administrator of EPA work with the Secretary of Energy to promote ENERGY STAR technologies as preferred for energy efficiency and reducing pollution, preserve the integrity of the ENERGY STAR label, and other specific activities. In addition to these statutory requirements for the EPA to conduct the ENERGY STAR program, the Full Year Continuing Resolution for FY2025 is based on funds for the ENERGY STAR program. How is EPA’s proposed reorganization of the Office of Air, which purports to eliminate the Office of Atmospheric Protection including the ENERGY STAR program, consistent with these laws?

Answer. We are currently evaluating a number of different options related to Energy Star; however, EnergyStar is a program the private sector can effectuate without excessive taxpayer resources.

Question. Does EPA intend to transfer the ENERGY STAR program to another entity and if so, is additional authority needed?

Answer. EPA is currently evaluating a number of options related to Energy Star including, but not limited to, privatizing the program or moving responsibilities to the Department of Energy.

Question. What steps will EPA take to obtain Congressional approval of its plans for ENERGY STAR?

Answer. EPA will follow the law in making decisions on the Energy Star program.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, did you account for these Federal cost savings to the taxpayer in your decision to eliminate ENERGY STAR? If so, what did you determine were the annual cost savings for the Federal government in using ENERGY STAR? If not, can you commit to the committee that you will develop an estimate of those cost savings and report to this committee a detailed accounting?

Answer. While the benefit of Energy Star is widely recognized, multiple private sector partners have reached out to EPA about taking on this work, similar to how LEED certification is run by a nonprofit. I recognize that EPA should concentrate our focus on statutorily required, uniquely Federal activities. We are looking at next steps for the program.

Question. What is the value of U.S. economic activity generated by the ENERGY STAR program?

Answer. It is unclear what the economic activity generated by the program is versus what the economic activity would be without this program. As this program does not preclude the purchase or sales of any product this program is essentially a government-sponsored advertising regime. We expect that companies will and would have promoted their own products but for the Energy Star program. This does not account for tax benefits that state or the Federal government has tied to Energy Star program which can be modified to a performance-based approach that minimizes or eliminates potential impacts.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH

Question. Late last year, Congress did something it doesn’t do very often pass a standalone, bipartisan legislation, through regular order. Senator Risch and I worked with 39 other Senate cosponsors to pass the Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act to make it easier for third-parties to clean up polluted mines they had no role in causing.

Can you provide an update on the EPA’s work to stand up this pilot program, and what you need from Congress to make it successful?

Answer. EPA's Office of Mountains Deserts and Plains has been meeting with stakeholders, federal land managers, and potential Good Samaritans as well as developing the key documents for establishing the pilot project permit program. The current plan is to issue the 15 authorized permits so that work in the field can begin on the following schedule:

- 2026 Construction Season: 1—3 projects
- 12027 Construction Season: 2—5 projects
- 12028 Construction Season: Remaining projects to reach 15 total

Congress gave EPA seven years to issue the 15 pilot project permits—we plan to do it in four years.

Question. Administrator Zeldin, you have said that you would ensure Americans have access to clean water. But this Administration is proposing to cut \$2.46 billion in funding specifically set aside for clean and safe drinking water. If the administration cuts this funding, and states like New Mexico do not have the funds to cover the difference, how will we make the water infrastructure improvements needed across the country?

Answer. The State Revolving Loan funds will continue to revolve as loan repayments, state match, and federal capital replenish the fund to allow for additional loans to be made for water infrastructure projects. In addition, EPA's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) program is also available to provide low-cost financing to public and private borrowers for all types of wastewater, drinking water, and stormwater projects. In New Mexico for example, \$20.9 million is currently revolving in the Clean Water SRF and \$24.7 million in the Drinking Water SRF. After decades of sustained federal investment, states are ready to contribute more funding to this mature program.

Question. This administration has, illegally, frozen and attempted to claw back funding for the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. This program was authorized by Congress and would improve air quality and create jobs in communities across the country. Administrator Zeldin, what would you say to the communities that competed for and were ready to use this funding to develop their local economies and provide good paying jobs for their residents?

Answer. EPA terminated these grants because the programs were designed through self-dealing and conflicts of interest, unqualified recipients, and reduced agency oversight. Instead of awarding money to shovel-ready projects, the Biden EPA again decided to fund organizations that fund organizations that fund organizations that, potentially, might use the money to fund projects. EPA looks forward to restructuring the program in a more efficient and accountable way.

Question. The Energy Star program at EPA is, by its own admission, "one of the most successful voluntary U.S. government programs in history". Fundamentally, EnergyStar saves families money. Over the last 33 years, the program has saved consumers an estimated \$500 billion. Why block consumers from choosing what's best for their budgets?

Answer. Removing the EnergyStar program as a public taxpayer expense would not prevent consumers from making choices that are best for their budgets. Companies provide information related to the cost of the products and energy usage as part of their sales information. There are many different approaches that we are exploring that could save the federal government significant amount of money, while still continuing the areas of success with the program. This could involve working with the private sector for more efficient implementation.

Question. For decades, the EPA has published Inventory of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks reports. This annual report provides a comprehensive accounting of total greenhouse gas emissions from all man-made sources in the United States and data on carbon dioxide removal from the atmosphere by forests, soils, and other sinks. The gases covered by the Inventory include carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, sulfur hexafluoride, and nitrogen trifluoride. In a recent op-ed, you said "one of the core elements of the EPA's mission is protecting air quality." How will the EPA protect air quality without recording and publishing emissions data?

Answer. EPA continues to record and publish emissions data related to criteria air pollutants and hazardous air pollutants.

Question. How does the EPA plan to ensure meaningful and consistent consultation with Tribes during permitting reform processes, especially given the unique role Tribes play as either permitting agencies or as sovereign governments impacted by state-issued permits?

Answer.

- The EPA is guided by the federal trust responsibility to federally recognized tribes, longstanding practice and experience consulting with tribes, and internal policies that guide EPA's work such as the 1984 EPA Indian Policy and the EPA Consultation Policy.
- EPA follows these policies and complies with the federal trust responsibility when implementing programs under federal environmental law. EPA notes that it was one of the first federal agencies to have a formal Indian policy describing the manner in which the agency works in partnership with Tribes.
- Further, OITA provides national guidance on the EPA Consultation Policy and each major EPA headquarters and regional office have staff dedicated to implementing the policy on agency actions, including on potential reforms to permitting processes.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND

Question. The Long Island Sound Program is one of EPA's Geographic Programs and it's a program that we worked together to reauthorize in 2018 while you were a Member of Congress. We have seen firsthand the great results this funding has had for the ecological health and water quality of the Sound. The President's FY26 skinny budget did not include any details on the Long Island Sound Program. Can you give me and the subcommittee your support to continue fully funding the Long Island Sound Geographic Program?

Answer. The Long Island Sound Program is one I have long supported. Its support for the protection and restoration of water quality, habitat, and living resources in the Sound is fully funded in the FY 2026 Budget Request with \$40 million.

Question. The success of the Long Island Sound Geographic Program relies on dedicated EPA staff. EPA leadership and continued participation in the program is crucial, especially as there is a new and updated Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for 2025 to 2035. What steps will you take to ensure adequate staffing to carry out Congressionally- authorized geographic programs like the Long Island Sound Program?

Answer. I have committed to ensuring that EPA has the necessary staff to fulfill its statutory obligations, including for this program.

Question. The Long Island Sound is just one of the Geographic Programs to support New York's waterbodies and watersheds. The EPA has Geographic Programs that fund restoration, education, and community engagement activities in Lakes Erie and Ontario through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Lake Champlain through its Basin Program, and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, of which, the headwaters are in New York's Southern Tier. The skinny budget does not mention these programs. Can you commit your full support to fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Lake Champlain Basin Program, and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed?

Answer. EPA greatly values the important work happening in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Lake Champlain Basin Program, and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, and funding is provided for each of these programs as part of the President's FY 2026 Budget Request. Great Lakes is fully funded with \$368 million, Chesapeake Bay is fully funded with \$92 million and Lake Champlain with \$15.6 million.

Question. New York State has over 80 Superfund sites, of which over 20 are on Long Island, and we also have one of the largest Superfund sites in the country—the Hudson River PCBs Superfund Site. I am concerned by the President's proposed decrease in funding for EPA's Superfund Program. I am especially concerned by the loss of dedicated EPA staff in Region 2 who work to hold polluters accountable and remediate some of the most dangerous and contaminated sites on Long Island. Will you push back against OMB, OPM, and DOGE to protect staff in EPA Region 2 and Superfund staff in all of EPA's regional offices?

Answer. I fully support all our employee's decision to take or not take the DRP/VERA option. I am excited that the majority of the hard-working staff throughout the agency will remain at the EPA to continue to ensure that we meet our statutory obligations, including our Superfund program. We will continue to fund our important Superfund work in Region 2.

Question. EPA staff conduct significant outreach to New York communities. As it relates to Superfund sites, it's crucial for the EPA to communicate and conduct outreach to nearby communities and stakeholders. New York's population is incredibly diverse, and according to the State, there millions of households whose primary language is not English. They speak dialects of Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Yiddish, Bengali, Korean, Haitian Creole, Italian, Arabic, French Polish, and many more. Do

you agree with that it's important for the EPA to communicate with communities near Superfund sites? And if so, then can you commit to me that the EPA will do this outreach in languages other than English to ensure New York communities are informed of the EPA's Superfund activities and educated on the potential public health risks of these sites?

Answer. EPA will continue to prioritize working with local communities with efforts to accelerate cleanups at Superfund sites being our most effective way to help these communities. EPA is also exploring ways to use AI tools to assist with translation needs.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator MURKOWSKI. And with that, the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:25 p.m., Wednesday, May 14, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:36 a.m. in Room SD-124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Lisa Murkowski (chairwoman) presiding.

Present: Senators Murkowski, Hoeven, Mullin, Rounds, Merkley, Murray, Van Hollen, Heinrich, Baldwin, and Ossoff.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

STATEMENT OF HON. DOUGLAS BURGUM, SECRETARY

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

Senator MURKOWSKI. Call to order the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee.

Secretary Burgum, good morning. Welcome to the committee. It is good to have you here to discuss the President's fiscal year 2026 Budget Request for the Department of Interior.

I am 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 has been a real pleasure. I have appreciated the meetings that we have had, the conversations that we have had by phone, and it has been great to meet the various assistant secretary nominees from the Department. I have enjoyed our conversations there. I am impressed by their understanding of the issues that they focus on and their commitment to public service. You are building out quite the team.

It was great to be able to talk to Kate MacGregor. 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 are eager to get her confirmed and to work, as well as some of the other nominees. We are still waiting for some of the key ones. As the Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, we are 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 National Recreation and Park Association (NPRA), our non-wilderness coastal plain, Alaska LNG, but there has been very swift, very early, and decisive action in this space, and it is welcome both here in Washington, DC., and certainly in my state. So I am 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 is going to be a great trip, lots of good information, good feedback, and good weather. I am hopeful that the Denali will be out in all of its majesty and splendor, and you will be reminded why Alaskans prefer the Koyukon Athabascan named Denali, meaning "the great one."

The President and you have set out an ambitious agenda, particularly with respect to the focus on energy and economic development. I am 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 the Interior can be an economic force for good 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 Park System.

National Parks in the home states of the members on this subcommittee and generates a collective \$7.4 billion of economic output annually. That is more than the gross domestic product of 40 different countries. But it is not just the economic output that makes parks so important, it is the experiences of traveling to parks, seeing the wildlife, having an adventure that creates a lifetime of memories. We have had discussions about some of your early years and the significance of that.

Back home in Alaska, we have 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 1.65 million visitors for the tourism season. That is about double the population of our state. So when we see a skinny budget that proposes to cut \$1.2 billion, or 35 percent from Park Service, it is hard to square that 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 am trying to figure out exactly how this would work. I am kind of thinking it is 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 our people.

So should this concept be included in the full budget request, I would 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 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Bureau of Indian Education

(BIE). Cutting nearly \$1 billion from Indian Affairs would hurt the Federal Government's ability to meet its trust responsibility to Native people. In some of our conversations I have 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 on law enforcement, I am 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 worry that cuts of this magnitude cannot be made up for by directing tribes to apply for grants at the Department of Justice (DOJ), 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 is the men and women of the Department, the people who actually make things happen. We have talked about a lot of good ideas for using new systems, IT systems, artificial intelligence, how we can make the Department more efficient. These are good goals, worthy goals. And I hope to see that detailed more in the budget.

But I think we know when we are 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 can become less efficient. When I think about the executive order as it relates specifically to Alaska, we have got some good things that we want to do up north when it comes to resource development, but scientific and ecological assessments that are provided by USGS are relied upon not just by Federal Land Management agencies, but by the industry as well.

So USGS science helps avoid polar bear dens, identify permafrost, map caribou migration patterns. So when we see cuts to U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), but also Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), and Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE), it causes me to wonder: are we going to be able to accomplish what we are all seeking to accomplish together?

I think it is important also that people have expertise and knowledge about the places that they serve. I had this conversation with folks in the Forest Service, you just can't take somebody who maybe comes from Indianapolis, a good Forest Service person, but you put them out at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center, where their job is bear management. They don't have a clue about bear management. We want to make sure that we are making good and smart decisions.

I know you are probably going to get a lot of questions today about staffing cuts and how that is going to impact the operations of the Department, and not just here in Washington, but around the country.

I do wish that the acting assistant secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget, Mr. Hassen, is here today to answer some of these questions, because he seems to be in charge of making a lot of the decisions about the staffing and the reorg. I am 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 have been a governor—you know the buck stops with you. He can be responsible for certain things, but ultimately it is you that are accountable. So getting the answers to questions about the reorganizations, the impacts of Reduction in Force (RIFs), 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 constructive way I think is going to be important.

But my bottom line to you this morning is, I am pleased with your nomination. I am excited that you are there at the Department. I am really excited about the shift that we are 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 are going to be able to do together.

With that, I will turn to Senator Merkley.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Senator MERKLEY. 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 4 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 U.S. operating at an all-time high for energy production, and more than 19 million leased acres sitting idle across the country, that is 46 percent of the on-shore acres and 79 percent of the offshore acres, yet, the administration lied to the American people, and declared a bogus energy emergency. And now you are expediting fossil fuel permitting and dropping protections for vast swaths of public lands while restricting renewable energy production. You don't have an "all of 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 treas-

ures. I never expected to see an administration openly propose to offload vast numbers of national park sites onto the states, 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 trail groups. I never expected 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, of 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 core tribal programs for road maintenance, for public safety, for social services, and other vital services, nearly in half. Or cut tribal school administration by 80 percent in a system with \$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 11th calling these cuts absolutely unacceptable and that they, quote, "undermine the sacred promises made by the United States to tribal nations."

Madam Chair, I would like to submit that letter for the record. Senator MURKOWSKI. Without objection.
[The information follows:]

April 11, 2025

The Honorable Douglas Burgum
 Secretary
 United States Department of the Interior
 1849 C Street N.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20240
via email: douglas_burgum@ios.doi.gov

Dear Secretary Burgum,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations serving Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens and communities, we write to follow up on our [initial letter](#) to you, and express our deep and sincere concern regarding reports that the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Budget Request will contain extreme cuts to Indian Affairs funding. Specifically, it has come to our attention that the Office of Management and Budget has passed back a FY 2026 budget proposal that would cut \$1.2 billion from the Indian Affairs budget, including a \$100 million cut to the Office of Justice Services (OJS) alone. This is absolutely unacceptable.

As you know, Tribal Nations have political, government-to-government relationships with the United States, and we prepaid with our lands and resources for the federal government's trust and treaty obligations which are carried out, in part, through a series of federal statutory mandates. Any Tribal program or federal funding delivered to Tribal Nations—including through Tribal Colleges and Universities, as well as Tribal organizations serving Tribal Nations—is provided in furtherance of the United States' trust and treaty obligations. The federal employees necessary for the functioning of Tribal programs and the disbursement of funds to Tribal Nations are also part of the trust and treaty obligations. These actions are not discretionary; they are legal obligations rooted in treaties, trust obligations, the U.S. Constitution, and federal statutes.

At the same time, Indian Country faces decades of chronic underfunding, especially for the essential services provided through the Indian Affairs budget, and Tribal Nations are already forced to operate without appropriate resources. The impacts of this failure to deliver upon federal promises are visible throughout Indian Country. By nearly every measure and indicator, Tribal Nations and our citizens face a lower quality of life than do others in the United States. The disruption of what little resources are flowing will only deepen the divide between Indian Country and the rest of America.

A proposed cut to OJS is particularly distressing, considering both this Administration's commitment to public safety through Operations Lady Justice and Spirit Return, as well as the persistent gap in funding for this critical governmental infrastructure. A recent Tribal Law and

Order Act Report to Congress for FY 2021¹ revealed that the estimated amount of funding needed to meet the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) obligation for public safety and justice funding to Indian Country is \$3.5 billion—over one billion more than the entire current BIA budget. According to testimony provided to Congress by Indian Affairs in November of 2024, the federal government is only funding 13% of the full funding due—measured by DOI in terms of “need”—for public safety and justice programs.

We are not the cause of federal deficits, nor should federal savings be achieved to our detriment. In fact, the U.S. should prioritize payment on debt to Tribal Nations as its original creditors.

President Trump has long recognized Indian Country as a strong partner, and Tribal Nations are ready to work with the Trump Administration to pursue shared goals. However, proposing draconian cuts to the provision of trust and treaty obligations at Indian Affairs will do nothing to advance our mutual interests. Rather, it will serve to further undermine the sacred promises made by the United States to Tribal Nations.

As the Secretary of the Interior, we urge that you oppose the inclusion of these cuts in the President's Budget Request.

Sincerely,

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI)
 American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)
 California Tribal Chairpersons' Association (CTCA)
 Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association (GPTCA)
 Indian Gaming Association (IGA)
 Inter Tribal Association of Arizona (ITAA)
 Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes (MAST)
 National American Indian Housing Council (NAIHC)
 National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development (NCAIED)
 National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)
 National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH)
 National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA)
 National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
 National Indian Health Board (NIHB)
 National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC)
 Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB)
 Self-Governance Communication & Education Tribal Consortium (SGCETC)
 United South & Eastern Tribes Sovereign Protection Fund (USET SPF)
 United Tribes of Michigan (UTM)

¹ Bureau of Indian Affs. Off. of Just. Servs., *Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs of Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021 1* (2024), https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/2021_tloa_report_final_508_compliant.pdf.

Senator MERKLEY. I never expected to see an administration delay funding for wildfire preparedness and fire red card employees who are trained to fight wildfires, or try to end air and smoke monitoring in national parks as we enter wildfire season. And here we are, on the brink of another fire season. You have left us less prepared.

Safeguarding endangered species and ecosystems, preserving public lands, supporting tribal nations, protecting against wildfires are fundamental responsibilities of the Department. For the Trump administration, however, it is 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." An environmentalist and novelist, Wallace Stegner, said, "National parks are the best idea we ever had."

If creating the national park system was the best idea we have had, this administration's assault on the national park system is one of the worst. Parks bind us together as a nation. They are shared natural wonders, open to all. Parks preserve and show us our shared history, places 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 park sites, including sites that are not part of the capital N, capital P system, like the Oregon Caves 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 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's soul on the rim of the Grand Canyon? How do you measure the value of a fourth grader gasping in awe at the unspoiled natural wonder of Crater Lake in Oregon, or of an adult who watched civil rights marches on TV in the '60s walking across 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 are 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 Park sites, our National Wildlife Refuges, our National Landscape Conservation System belong to the American people. They are not for sale.

So today, I will 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 the 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. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Merkley.

Mr. Secretary, again, welcome to the committee. You have five minutes to give us a little bit of the outline here. Your full statement, of course, is included as part of the record. And we look forward to the exchange with members at the conclusion.

Please proceed, and welcome.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG BURGUM

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you, Chairman Murkowski, and Ranking Member Merkley. It is a pleasure to be here this morning. I look forward to a dialogue on the topics raised during your open comments, and other questions that the members may have.

So again, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning, to President Trump's fiscal year 2026, Budget Blueprint, and talk about the actions we can take working with you to make America safer, stronger, more beautiful, and more prosperous.

Interior-managed resources hold a significant portion—position on America's balance sheet. The public lands and minerals within Interior's domain include more than 480 million acres of surface land, 750 million acres of subsurface mineral estate, and more than 2.5 billion acres offshore. Our natural resources are national assets, and they should be responsibly developed to grow our economy, help us balance the budget, generate revenue for the American taxpayers.

With commonsense approaches and modern systems, we can increase our return for citizens, strengthen our economy, and create great-paying and meaningful jobs, all while protecting our beautiful lands, our abundant wildlife, our clean air and water.

The President's fiscal year 2026 Budget Blueprint requests \$11.9 billion in current authority for the Department, which provides significant savings for the American people. Of that about \$10.6 billion of that is within the jurisdiction of this committee. The fiscal year 2026 Budget features strategic investments to further President Trump's commitment to energy dominance, which is the foundation of American prosperity, national security, and world peace.

Last month, we were working to remove layers of red tape that undermine coal production on Federal lands. Clean American coal is a triple win for our country because thermal coal provides reliable and affordable baseload electricity. Metallurgical coal is foundational for bringing back our steel industry, and the mining and refining of our coal that contains critical and rare earth minerals is essential to secure our own domestic supply chains for our defense, transportation, and tech industries.

We are also busy rectifying mountains of restrictions designed to restrict resource development in Alaska. And we are increasing the production of affordable, reliable energy on Federal lands. We have taken commonsense, simple measures to help increase production in the Gulf of America by 100,000 barrels a day, which will help reduce the price at the pump for American families. And we are following the law, and we have proudly announced that we will have the first lease sale in the newly named "Gulf of America" that will occur later this year.

Right now, America is in an artificial intelligence (AI) arms race with China. And keeping our energy production for electricity, our baseload power production open, will help us win this contest while driving down electricity costs for American families. We are also undertaking efforts to establish our position as a leading producer and processor of critical and rare earth minerals, which will create jobs and prosperity at home, strengthen domestic supply chains of the United States and its allies, and reduce the precarious position that we are in relative to China controlling 85 percent of the refining for rare earth minerals.

Preventing and combating wildfires is vitally important to protect people, communities, the environment, and the Federal wildfire risk mitigation suppression responsibility is split currently across five agencies and two departments. This creates duplicative

and ineffective structures. The budget that you are seeing today reforms wildland fire management to create operational efficiencies by creating a unified Federal wildland fire responsibility that would combine those five agencies to help work on suppression, risk mitigation, and coordination with non-Federal partners.

The Department of the Interior upholds the Federal Government's unique trust responsibilities by fostering the government-to-government relations between the Federal Government, the federally recognized Tribes, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives. And this budget supports programs at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education, sustaining the Federal Government's support for core programs that benefit tribal communities.

Since becoming Secretary, I have traveled to national parks, historic sites, Bureau of Land Management locations, Wildlife Refuges, and Bureau of Reclamation sites to learn more and hear from leadership on the ground, hearing from them about the red tape that we put on their lives that gets in the way of doing the great work that those team members on the front lines do. We are instituting changes to get more people actually working on the front lines, more minutes on mission, if you will, in the parks, in fire-fighting. And we will be talking more about that today.

We are opening more areas to hunting and outdoor recreation. Hundreds of more locations across our wildlife and public lands will be open to help drive tourism, create jobs, and generate revenue for local communities, all while promoting responsible stewardship of our natural resources as we work with conservation, fishing, and hunting groups across the country.

Interior is also very focused on streamlining our core business operations, which appears to not have been looked at for decades and decades. This will result in dramatically improved efficiencies and lower costs for American taxpayers. It is going to allow us to take costs out of the budget without affecting any of the operations that we all care about on the ground at the refuges and parks.

This budget is about putting America first and doing what is best for the American taxpayer as Interior moves forward. These initiatives set the foundation for a renewed focus on responsible resource management and economic growth.

I appreciate that this subcommittee has strongly supported the Department's mission. I look forward to working closely with you to advance the President's priorities. Thank you.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG BURGUM

Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of President Trump's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Blueprint request for the Department of the Interior and discuss what our team is doing to make America safer, stronger, more beautiful, and more prosperous.

The Department of the Interior oversees onshore and offshore energy resources, honors Federal Trust responsibilities with our Tribal neighbors, delivers water to the West, and oversees wildlife refuges and national parks. The resources that we sustainably govern directly impact the lives of every American every day.

Interior-managed resources hold a significant position on America's Balance Sheet. The public lands and minerals within the Interior domain include more than 480 million acres of surface land, 750 million acres of subsurface and mineral estate, and more than 2.5 billion acres offshore. We believe that our natural resources are national assets that should be responsibly developed to grow our economy, help bal-

ance the Budget, and generate revenue for American taxpayers. With common sense approaches and modern systems, we can increase returns for our citizens, strengthen our economy, and create great-paying and meaningful jobs—all while protecting our beautiful lands, our abundant wildlife, and our clean air and clean water.

The President's 2026 Budget blueprint requests \$11.9 billion in current authority for the Department of the Interior, providing significant savings to the American people. Of that amount, \$10.6 billion is within the jurisdiction of the Interior-Environment Appropriations subcommittee. The 2026 Budget blueprint was provided so your subcommittee may begin debate and consideration of appropriations bills for the upcoming fiscal year.

Unleashing American Energy. The 2026 Budget for the Department features strategic investments to further President Trump's commitment to Energy Dominance, which is the foundation of American prosperity, national security, and world peace.

This Budget prioritizes America's energy independence with a strategy that focuses on the development of ample baseload power that is needed to solve the inherited electricity crisis which underpins the National Energy Emergency that was wisely declared by President Trump on his first day in office. The Department of the Interior has already taken meaningful measures to reverse the mountains of red tape intended to suppress US energy production. We are increasing production of affordable, reliable energy on Federal lands and reviving our Nation's understanding of the National security need for mining for critical, rare earths, and other important minerals. The Budget also advances key national priorities including enhanced border security, an optimized workforce that leverages resources and maximizes taxpayer dollars, and the President's commitment to restore confidence in America's fiscal management by eliminating wasteful and unnecessary spending.

At the end of the previous administration, 625 million acres of offshore acreage—certainly worth trillions of dollars—was bafflingly restricted from development with the stroke of a pen. President Trump acted swiftly to remedy that insanity. We proudly announced that the first lease sale in the appropriately renamed Gulf of America will occur this year—a move that generates immediate and long-term revenue for the Treasury. With a simple, commonsense offshore commingling policy change we're increasing production of oil in the Gulf of America by 100,000 barrels per day—which will help reduce the price at the pump for American families. And as we begin to get back into the business of mapping the full extent of the resources within the Federal estate, we recently published a finding showing there is at least 23% more recoverable oil and gas in the Gulf of America than previously known! This number will continue to increase, as new innovations occur.

President Trump made himself very clear via executive order that he wanted to unleash Alaska's energy potential, so we have been busy reviewing and rectifying the mountain of restrictions—including 68 Executive orders from the previous administration—that were designed to restrict resource development in Alaska. Interior plans to reopen up to 82% (19 million+ acres) of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska for leasing and energy development opportunities. We are in the process of reinstating a program that makes the entire 1.56-million-acre Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) available for oil and gas leasing. And we have initiated action along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline Corridor and Dalton Highway north of the Yukon River to convey these lands to State of Alaska. These are critical steps for developing the proposed Ambler Road, which would provide access to mineral-rich areas, and the crucial Alaska Liquified Natural Gas Pipeline project.

Americans rejoiced when President Trump formally ended the "War on Coal" that caused great damage to our economy and national security. Beautiful, clean American coal has survived decades of regulatory assault and will play a pivotal role in continuing to power America going forward. Last month, we ended the Obama-era Federal Coal Moratorium and removed layers of red tape that undermined beautiful, clean American coal production on Federal lands. We approved the expansion of the Spring Creek Coal Mine in Montana, which has 40 million tons of recoverable resource and directly supports hundreds of American jobs. Clean American coal is a "triple win" for our country because thermal coal provides reliable and affordable baseload electricity, metallurgical coal is foundational for bringing back our steel industry, and the mining and refining of coal that contains critical and rare earth minerals is essential to secure our own domestic supply chains for our defense, transportation, and tech industries which are currently heavily dependent on foreign sources. Moreover, the US Geological Survey recently provided us with an estimate that our coal reserves are worth somewhere around \$8 trillion—which should be counted as a big-time asset on America's Balance Sheet!

Right now, America is in an Artificial Intelligence Arms Race with China. Beijing controls the processing of 85% of critical minerals and is dramatically increasing their coal production and other forms of baseload power. The Communist Party

leadership knows that the A.I. Arms Race will be won by the country with the best technology and most electricity. We hold a slight lead in our AI software, but we are now forced to play catch up on baseload power generation due to the Climate Extremist policies of the prior administration that raised prices, lowered reliability, and contributed to our National debt and deficit. Keeping domestic coal-fired power generation open will help us win this contest, help ensure 24 x 7 x 365 reliability, while also driving down electricity costs for American families even as the demand rises as data centers are built.

The Department is also undertaking efforts to establish our position as the leading producer and processor of critical and rare earth minerals, which will create jobs and prosperity at home, strengthen domestic supply chains for the United States and its allies, and reduce the global influence of adversarial States. We will prioritize America's critical mineral dominance by updating the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) list of critical minerals and continuing the ongoing geological mapping of the country. The Budget will also support programs that support USGS's ability to provide high-level energy and mineral characterizations that will afford greater understanding of the country's expansive resources. On these fronts, we're already making great progress with actions such as approving rare earth mineral exploration at the Colosseum Mine. And as part of our commitment to the "Map, Baby, Map!" surveying ethos, we published a factsheet on deep sea mineral opportunities.

The Budget also saves taxpayers \$80 million by eliminating the Department's "intermittent" energy programs that focus on unaffordable, unreliable energy to the detriment of American consumers, businesses, and communities. This includes eliminating funding that supports offshore wind projects that harm coastal communities, wildlife, and military readiness.

Improve Wildland Firefighting. Preventing and combating wildfires is vitally important to protect people, communities, and the environment. Nearly 65,000 wildfires burned more than 8.9 million acres across the United States last year, endangering communities, critical infrastructure, and local economies. The trend of increasingly extreme and frequent wildfires has continued, with catastrophic fires in Southern California and the Southeast in recent months.

Federal wildfire risk mitigation and suppression responsibilities for wildland fire are currently split across five agencies in two different departments. This current duplicative and ineffective structure defies commonsense. The Budget reforms Federal wildland fire management to create operational efficiencies by consolidating and unifying Federal wildland fire responsibilities into a new centralized Federal Wildland Fire Service at the Department of the Interior. The new unified service will employ all Federal wildland firefighters, procure and sustain Federal wildland fire resources and manage Federal wildland fire response policies. This new service will streamline Federal wildfire suppression response, risk mitigation efforts, and coordination with non-Federal partners to combat the wildfire crisis.

Supporting Tribal Nations. The Department of the Interior upholds the Federal Government's unique trust responsibilities by fostering the government-to-government relations between the Federal Government and federally recognized Tribes, American Indians, and Alaska Natives. The Budget supports programs at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education, sustaining the Federal Government's support for the core programs that benefit Tribal communities. At the same time, it streamlines programs for Tribal communities, to reduce inefficiencies and eliminate funding for programs and activities found to be ineffective. For example, the Budget eliminates the Indian Guaranteed Loan program for Tribal business development because it is duplicative of several other programs across the Federal Government that offer loans to small businesses and which Tribal businesses are eligible for and receive.

Expanding Outdoor Access. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt gave remarks at the laying of the cornerstone of the Gateway to Yellowstone where he described our National Parks as "great natural playgrounds" that exist for the "benefit and enjoyment" of the American people. Since becoming Interior Secretary, I've traveled to National Parks, historic sites, and wildlife refuges to learn and hear from leadership on the ground. We're instituting changes to get more people actually working in the parks and are looking forward to what Yellowstone Superintendent Cam Sholly forecasted to be an "outstanding summer." We've also attended events for the National Park Foundation, Trust for the National Mall, and met with National Trust for Public Lands leadership to help fortify the public-private partnerships that provide funding to enhance experiences for the hundreds-of-millions of annual visitors.

President Trump knows very well that America's connection with our beautiful public lands is strengthened through expanded access. In a major step to expand recreational access to America's public lands, Interior recently announced 42 new

proposed hunting opportunities across more than 87,000 acres within the National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery System. This proposal would more than 3X the number of opportunities and 5X the number of stations opened or expanded compared to the previous administration, underscoring the Trump Administration's strong national commitment to outdoor recreation and conservation. By opening more areas to hunting and outdoor recreation, we're helping drive tourism, create jobs, and generate revenue for local communities, all while promoting responsible stewardship of our natural resources.

Responsible Land Management. When it comes to land management, we are cutting wasteful spending by prioritizing the Administration's goals of federalism.

America needs more affordable housing, and the Federal Government can help make that happen by making Federal land available to build affordable housing stock. We created a Joint Task Force on Federal Land for Housing with Secretary Turner and HUD to increase housing supply and decrease costs for millions of Americans.

Under this agreement, HUD will pinpoint areas where housing needs are most pressing and guide the process by working with State and local leaders who know their communities best. Interior will identify locations that can support homes while carefully considering environmental impacts and land-use restrictions. Working together, our agencies will take inventory of underused Federal properties, transfer or lease them to States or localities to address housing needs, and support the infrastructure required to make development viable—all while ensuring affordability remains at the core of the mission.

Reforming the Department. Interior is focused on streamlining our core business operations, which will result in improved efficiencies and lower costs for American taxpayers. The Department has already taken steps to unify many of the Department's business functions within the Office of the Secretary. This unification includes human resources, information resources and technology management, training and development, civil rights and equal employment opportunity, procurement, Federal financial assistance (grants and cooperative agreements), communications, personnel security, finance, and other similar functions. Further unifying our organization will create significant efficiencies across the Department by optimizing processes, eliminating redundant efforts, and helping streamline technology adoption.

Interior will advance innovation, collaboration and solutions that address the pressing challenges of our time. In closing, this Budget is about putting America first and doing the best for the American taxpayer. As Interior moves forward, these initiatives set the foundation for a renewed focus on responsible resource management, and economic growth. By advancing policies that honor America's heritage while fostering innovation, the Department remains committed to serving the National interests of the American people.

Theodore Roosevelt once said that "far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." The work we do at Interior makes America more prosperous, beautiful, safe, and strong. Therefore, it is certainly work worth doing!

I appreciate that this subcommittee has strongly supported the Department's mission, and I look forward to working closely with you to advance the President's priorities.

WORKING TOGETHER

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. We will begin with a round of questions, five minutes apiece, and recognizing members in the order within which they have arrived.

I want to start, Mr. Secretary, just where you left off there, which is the extension of an offer to work with members on this committee. I was reminded last week when we had Secretary—excuse me—Administrator Zeldin here that many of us have the bat line, we can call the administrator, we can call the secretary, and I have appreciated that engagement. But I think we also recognize that our teams need to be able to have this level of direct communication as well.

And so in the effort to make sure that we are following the commitment of transparency, partnership, and responsiveness, I would like just your commitment, on behalf of your staff, that we are able

to set up at least quarterly meetings with your senior team, our senior approps folks here, to just go through many of the knits, and recognizing that quite often we are going to need more than just that, but just this regular communication, particularly at a time when there is so much that is going on right now with a re-programming, with restructuring, for us to better be able to help you, we just need that kind of commitment.

So it is worth a minute of my time at the top here to just ask for that public commitment to working with all of us here?

Secretary BURGUM. You have that commitment. And again, for those of you that are part of the confirmation process, thank you for continuing to move leaders forward. We are excited about having Kate MacGregor start on the Tuesday after Memorial Day. This will be the first of 16 Senate-nominated positions joining Interior. We have got some great candidates, and as we get those onboarded, we are going to make sure to be working closely with all of you.

ALASKA RESOURCES

Senator MURKOWSKI. Appreciate that, and we look forward to that. I mentioned how refreshing it is to have an administration that recognizes the extraordinary potential that we have in Alaska, viewing our resource assets as an asset rather than a liability that needs to be protected against. I have mentioned the executive order unleashing Alaska's extraordinary resource potential. You also had a corresponding secretary's order. I am hoping that you can share with me an update on the plans to meet implementation goals of this EO, and what Alaskans can expect to see in the works for this summer season.

And I also have mentioned in my opening statements my concern that as we are seeing this significant transition within the Department and workforce reduction initiatives, that we are not going to see any of this that happens back here undercutting both the President's and your stated policy goals as they relate to Alaska here.

WORKFORCE EFFICIENCIES

Secretary BURGUM. Well, I think the place I would like to start, which would be helpful I think for all the members of this committee, is to understand that when I came on board, one of the first things that I wanted to understand as an executive was how many people worked in each bureau, what roles they had, and where they were located. Of course, we had remote work in place when I entered the building after my confirmation. That headquarters could hold as many as 3,500 people, but there was nobody there.

There were the appointees that had come on, there were custodial staff, and I said, "where is everybody"? We have got a back-to-work order that is, you know, coming up. The back-to-work order occurred later in February, and then we started to have some people trickle into the building. We still have a building that maybe is one-third full. I said, well, I will just go to the systems and find out.

It turns out there was no way for me to even send an email to the 65,000 team members across all the bureaus. There was not a way to find out how many people worked in each of these bureau agencies. The IT systems are so incredibly outdated. And so then

I said, well, let us just start with parks, because that is obviously important to everybody. How many people work in the parks, and how many are permanent, how many are permanent-temporary, and how many are summer help? Just trying to find that out was difficult.

And then we got a number of about 26,500 people work in the park system. And my next question was, well, how many of them actually physically work in a park? And that answer took almost eight weeks, because we had to have a group of people pull from all these heterogeneous information systems, because we had a home address where maybe their payroll check is being sent. We did not, in many cases, even have duty stations for where people reported to.

And then when the number came back, I know everyone is just like hair on fire like: Oh, if we cut anybody, we are not going to be able to keep the parks open. The first number I got—slightly less than 50 percent of the permanent employees actually work in a park. They are working at a regional headquarters, they are working in some other location, they are working here in headquarters. And so then it was like, well, how many of them work by different functions?

Because we always talk about park rangers and wildland firefighters, which we had put as a protected class on all of the orders when I got there, which is, don't get rid of any wildland firefighters, don't get rid of any law enforcement, we don't want any of that. So then it comes back and of the 65,000 people in Interior, 2,000 of them are listed as being in HR. I did not hear anybody mention please protect the HR positions. We have got several thousand people working in IT, and I don't know what they do.

I am trying to find out, but I know we have got gobs and gobs of contractors chewing up the budget, and I think that people in IT are hiring contractors to do their work. And so my thesis right up front is for all the mischaracterization and hyperbole that somehow taking a hard look at our—at how we actually operate an agency of this scope and scale, that we can't have a substantial amount of savings, both in personnel cost and in dollars, and then actually end up with what all of us want, what all of you want, and what I want.

I want more; I want more people in the parks, whether they are driving a snow plow in the wintertime, or whether they are working with an interpreter in the summertime, or whether they are doing trail work. If they are firefighting, I want more of that. I want less overhead. Because when I talked to these park superintendents and I said: "How can I make your life more productive?" It is not just about "Oh. I need more people." Some of these parks, like Yellowstone, they have got more people working this summer than they ever had in the history of the park, or certainly more than they have had.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So Mr. Secretary.

Secretary BURGUM. So I mean, so we are up from where we were two or 3 years ago. But I am saying: "What can I do to help your life be more productive?" And they say: "Get rid of the red tape above me." And so that is one of the things we are working on. And

I think we are listening to the people that are actually on the job doing operations. And this is just common sense.

So I think we can accomplish the goals that were raised by Senator Merkley and others, which is we can get more people actually doing the work and have the savings. Then if I can produce the savings, if I can reinvest those, you know, into the things that matter to people like deferred maintenance.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So I let you go two minutes over my time, and I don't want to set that as the standard for the rest of my colleagues, because I understand we have a vote here, I think, at 11:30. And I want folks to be able to have multiple rounds. I do think it was kind of important to just lay the—set the table here for what we are seeing. So I appreciate that.

And now I am now going to turn to Senator Merkley.

NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you, Madam Chair. And Mr. Secretary, as you know, we have 63 crown jewels in our national park system. Where some people say: I want to visit every national park; they are normally talking about those crown jewels. But there are 370 other national park sites in the system. And those include, in Oregon, places like the Oregon Caves, the John Day Fossil Beds, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Park, places of significance certainly to the people of Oregon, but people of the nation.

You have proposed slashing \$900 million from the national park system by offloading some of those 370 national park sites that are not part of the crown jewels. And you calculated you could save this \$900 million with lower maintenance because there would be fewer sites. Do you have the list of sites that you plan to offload, for us?

Secretary BURGUM. I do not. This is a proposed idea, and the whole \$900 million is not related specifically. But thank you for clarifying for everyone that this does not touch any of, as you have described, "the crown jewel parks". But certainly, in places like North Dakota with Knife River Indian Villages, we have got places that were designated as Federal locations that have almost no visitors, they are cost centers. We have to staff them. We have to maintain them. And I know, as a governor that—

Senator MERKLEY. So are you going to send us a list of the proposed sites?

Secretary BURGUM. This is a proposal for the fiscal year 2026 budget, so we will be working through, and I think this is going to be a case-by-case, state-by-state, to see, but yes, we will send you it when we have the plan.

Senator MERKLEY. So it is almost I will try to keep moving quickly because of the limited time. But certainly, most of these, there are a small number that were not established through law, but almost all of the 370 were established by law. Is it your understanding that we would have to change the law in order for you to be able to put these sites up for transfer?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay, I appreciate that, because we were very concerned that this would be a form of an executive action, and then we would all go to court and fight it out because the law es-

tablished them, and we believe that the law has to be changed in order to send them off. And if you have some in your home state that you are comfortable sending off, you could request the governors to say what they want to do. But I have a feeling the Governor of Oregon would say these sites, these three sites in Oregon and others, are of great value to our national system for all Americans.

FISCAL YEAR 2025 FUNDING

I want to turn to the challenge of getting answers from your Department. We have had repeated requests dating back to January 23rd about funding—whether you want to use the term “frozen” or the term “impounded” or “delayed” and we have not gotten answers. How do we get answers from your staff?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, let us start with any specific ones you may not have. I mean, we are following the executive orders to review. There was an enormous amount of money that went out the door between November 6th and January 20th. I think everyone would say that it would be responsible for us to make sure that those funds were going to the recipients that it was intended.

Senator MERKLEY. Just getting any kind of an answer would at least have us know that your team is actually paying attention to our requests for information. Can I call you when we can't get information?

Secretary BURGUM. Yeah, absolutely.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. Our national partners who are fighting poaching and trafficking of elephants and rhinos, have not been able to access their legally obligated funds since January 20th. Are these funds blocked? Are they delayed? Are they frozen? That is an example, you may not have the answer, but it is affecting studies that have been in motion, that many Americans passionately support our effort to be part of the international effort for these amazing animals.

Secretary BURGUM. And I am sorry, the question was.

Senator MERKLEY. Yes, the question is, if you do know the answer, you can tell me now. But otherwise, can you commit to getting us an answer?

Secretary BURGUM. Yeah, we can commit to getting you an answer.

GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. The law requires that we get a list for the Great American Outdoors Act and the Land and Water Conservation Fund projects by April 29th. Obviously, we are past that. We have not gotten that list. Can you assure us we will get it shortly?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. We will be working on that.

Senator MERKLEY. Working on it like, can we get it within the next couple of weeks?

Secretary BURGUM. We have got lots of irons in the fire right now, as we are trying to build up staff, but yes, we will be working on it.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, let me just note that the number of days left in fiscal year 2025 are evaporating. So there is less and less

time to actually have the funding that was passed by law transmitted in an effective way. We hope that when we see those lists, the funds will get out by the end of the fiscal year and that they will be fairly distributed across the country. What many are concerned about is we will see funding from the Great American Outdoors Act turn into a political tool. Can you commit that that will not happen?

Secretary BURGUM. We will follow the law related to the Great American Outdoors Act.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, that is not an answer, because the law gives you some flexibility. I am asking that this not become a fund to reward Blue or Red House districts in a discriminatory fashion?

Secretary BURGUM. I am smiling because that practice was so widely used by the prior administration. It is one of the things we are reviewing. But certainly, we will be trying to allocate the dollars based on the merit and based on following the law and within—

Senator MERKLEY. Actually, I think your statement was very inaccurate about the previous administration, but we will leave it to others to determine that situation. Because my time has evaporated, we will turn to Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. Senator Hoeven.

Secretary BURGUM. I just want to say, on the last thing, grants went up by over 100 percent in the last part of the last administration, if we cut them by 50 percent, we would be back to the level of spending we were at in 2021, at the beginning of the Biden administration. And so the idea that taking a look at any cut is some, you know, dangerous, destabilizing thing is just not true. This thing operated—all these agencies operated with far less spending for decades and decades compared to where they have been at the last year.

Senator MERKLEY. Madam Chair, let me just point out that is not a point that I made. So I don't appreciate you trying to pretend that I did.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let us go to Senator Hoeven, please.

WORKFORCE EFFICIENCIES

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks for being here, Mr. Secretary. Appreciate it, appreciate your service. Have you ever started any businesses and run any businesses?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator HOEVEN. Have you served as a governor at any point in your career?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator HOEVEN. In any of those positions, did you go in and work to find savings, and also then put people and systems in place that actually, while saving money, enabled you to provide better services to your customers?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. Thank you, Senator Hoeven. When I came into North Dakota, we had a \$6 billion general fund, and we cut it by \$1.7 billion, 27 percent the first 4 months I was in office. All the trains left and still ran on time, and we created more meaningful, more purposeful jobs for the people that worked there.

Senator HOEVEN. In fact, not only do you have a great love of the outdoors, you are a rancher, you like to hunt, but one of your specialties is finding and putting in place systems that actually improve the productivity of the workforce so you deliver better service at lower cost. That is one of the things you specialize in, isn't it?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, I spent two and a half decades in the private sector developing software systems to do exactly that.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes. And so the other thing that would actually help you accomplish that and make sure there are more people in the parks, and that the American citizens are better served, is if you could actually get your management team in place, right? Instead of having it held up for no good reason. So you just said what: You have got one of sixteen people that have to be confirmed, and we sit here voting in the middle of the night because nobody will let you get your team on board so you can do the very things that some here want to criticize you for. Would you say that is accurate?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, we have the first member starting next week within the executive leadership team.

Senator HOEVEN. So if somebody really wanted to help you get your team in place and make sure that service is getting done, seems like they would want to help you get that team in place rather than hold it up, wouldn't you think? Would that make sense to you?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. I know you are aware of the Advanced Training Center that we have at Camp Grafton, which is our National Guard facility in North Dakota, and that you have worked with it. And you are probably aware of the recent statistics of more than 5,400 law enforcement BIA law enforcement officers trained—3,000 of them got training at that facility. And so it supports Artesia in terms of getting BIA law enforcement officers trained up and on the job.

And we only have, in the Northern Plains, about 50 percent of those staff positions filled, meaning almost a 50 percent vacancy rate. So my question to you is: Will you work with us? And we have got the senator here from New Mexico, so he knows Artesia, he knows how important this issue is, but particularly for the Northern Plains and folks that live up there and want to stay up there, we have got to enhance this training and expand the course offerings. Are you willing to work in support of that?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, absolutely.

WILD HORSES

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. The next question I have is, we have wild horses in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I have got a bill in with Senator Kaine, bipartisan, he has some experience with the horses out, you know, on the East Coast in the parks there. It would make sure that—require maintenance of a genetically diverse herd, in no event less than 150 horses; are you in support of that legislation?

Secretary BURGUM. Yeah, absolutely.

PUBLIC LANDS

Senator HOEVEN. Talk to me about the public lands rule, under the Biden administration, they sought to essentially put more than 245 million acres off limits, of public land off limits for any kind of energy development. For example, just in our state, that is 45 percent of the Federal oil and gas acreage, and that is 99 percent of the Federal coal acreage. That is just our state. Okay.

So talk to me about the importance of addressing that rule, overhauling that rule, and making sure that we have access on behalf of—you know, you can talk about the balance sheet here a little bit if you want, in terms of our Federal assets, for energy production on behalf of this country, and you know, one of your key roles in terms of energy development?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, yes, Senator Hoeven. Striking hundreds of millions of acres off of America's balance sheet was basically like stealing from our children and our children's children, because all of those represent the opportunity to sustainably develop, whether it is grazing, whether it is forestry, whether it is critical minerals, which are essential for national security, whether it is just energy development to help win the AI arms race with China.

All of those things are essential, and public lands were meant for the benefit and the use of the American people. They were not meant to be all—certainly, some areas are wilderness areas and need to be protected completely, like National Parks and Wilderness areas, but that represents a small fraction of the total amount.

So I am with you completely, and it is completely irresponsible that we would cheer when we are hurting ourselves financially, because when we shut down the multiple-use doctrine for public lands, we are actually hurting America, and we are helping our adversaries.

PRODUCTIVITY

Senator HOEVEN. Yeah. And Madam Chair, just a final question quickly, but it is just to once again reaffirm Your whole career, in every capacity you have had, has been to provide better service to the people that you are working for, whether it is in a business, or whether it is for the state. And given the opportunity, you believe you can do that here as well, in other words, better service in the national parks, better resource management, if you are given the chance to do it, right?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. I have never entered an organization that has this much redundant overhead and outdated systems, I have never seen anything like it. It is worse than when I walked in North Dakota 9 years ago and the opportunities for creating better, more meaningful jobs for our dedicated team members, and to deliver better service is enormous.

Senator HOEVEN. And I have known you for over 30 years, and you have done it in every role, and I would just encourage people to work with you, and they will be very pleased, I believe, with the outcome.

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you, sir.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Hoeven.

Senator Murray.

HURRICANE RIDGE

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Chair Murkowski.

Mr. Secretary, I wanted to start by touching briefly on Hurricane Ridge. That is a place, as you know, that is very special to people in my home state of Washington, and visitors come to it from all over the world. I know that you visited Olympic National Park last week, and you saw how scenic it was, and a hint of how brutal the weather can be, it is called Hurricane Ridge for a reason.

The Hurricane Ridge Day Lodge burned down in a tragic fire 2 years ago, and Congress delivered the emergency funding necessary to rebuild it last year. In the execution report that you delivered to the committee in February, the disaster funding spend plan, you included the money for the Olympic National Park, I understand, it is for Hurricane Ridge. Do you have any updates for us on the next steps for that project?

Secretary BURGUM. No. But I did have an opportunity with the park superintendent and some of the lead people to actually get to Hurricane Ridge, and thankfully, there were not 70-mile-an-hour winds, it was beautiful, sunny, calm gorgeous. But I got to see the site where the fire had happened and was able to meet with them regarding the plans that they have, and it looks like a great, great project.

Senator MURRAY. Good. And can you just keep my staff and me updated on that project as it moves forward; it is really important to all of us.

Secretary BURGUM. Okay. Thank you.

PUBLIC LANDS AND NATIONAL PARKS

Senator MURRAY. Thank you. As you saw, Washington State is home to a number of pristine public lands. People travel from all over the world to experience my state—and Oregon. Secretary Burgum, our public lands aren't for sale. Protecting our wilderness, living up to our tribal obligations, keeping our communities safe, that it is just not negotiable, and it is actually a core reason that your Department does exist. And these have been places with strong bipartisan support.

So I am really concerned that one of the first things you did was make deep, painful cuts at our parks and start talking about our public lands kind of like they are a piggy bank. I do not want to tell future generations that: You see that river of sludge, it used to be clear, it used to have salmon. Or, you see that charred mountainside, it used to be a forest with campgrounds and trails. Or that smokestack used to be a national park.

I worry because it feels to me like your vision could lead to that, with your budget cuts and mass firings and reorganization. And I am deeply concerned about the proposed cuts to programs and funding that our tribes rely on, the mass firing of park rangers. They are the people who help our visitors. They clear the trails. They clean the bathrooms. They respond to emergencies. And it just, as I watch this, and hear from folks, and see what is happening on top of getting some bedrock environmental protections,

I just don't see how your Department can execute the law without staff in place.

So just let me ask you. In your short tenure, you have overseen significant staffing reductions, over 10 percent, and reorganization efforts across the Department of Interior, with I understand, more firings to come. The National Park Service has lost 18 percent of its staff. You managed to actually fire the only plumber at Mount Rainier National Park. There is just nothing efficient about that kind of management. You have also decided that what few staff remain at our national parks will focus solely on visitor services.

That really abandons the conservation mission, which, no doubt will lead to the degradation of our natural resources and our parks. Actually, on May 8th, five former NPS directors, Republican and Democratic administrations alike, raised really grave concerns about these decisions, and they wrote that the National Park Service's founding statute requires conservation at our parks so they will, quote, "be unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations".

You know, we need trail guides, and biologists, we need EMTs and geologists, we need snowplow drivers, and we need historians. Mr. Secretary, do you acknowledge that you do have a statutory obligation to conserve our national parks? And that is really a simple yes or no.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

WORKFORCE EFFICIENCIES

Senator MURRAY. Well, it just feels to me, watching this, that you are abandoning that obligation with the staffing cuts. And your job is to carry out the laws that Congress has passed, not as you wish were written. So let me ask you, how many people do you plan to fire from the National Park Service?

Secretary BURGUM. Let me respond by saying, I am going to repeat myself, that there is an opportunity to have more people working in our parks, in all the positions that you have described, Senator, and have less people working for the National Park Service. We just have to accept this math, that if you have a situation where slightly less than 50 percent of the people actually work in a park, I can increase the number of people in the park, but still decrease the number of people on payroll at the National Park Service, because we are eliminating overhead, back office, IT, and HR roles.

And so I can agree with everything that you are saying, but then to have a mischaracterization that if we cut anybody, that somehow I am cutting into the conservation mission.

Senator MURRAY. Well, it is huge cuts, and the people you are talking about are actually the support staff. And when you cut support staff that is not efficient. You know, how does someone drive a snowplow if you don't have a staffer that makes sure that the government gets the best deal to buy that snowplow? I mean, there is many, many detailed people that you are talking about that actually make sure that the spending is efficient, that the people are efficient, that we all know how important staff is. I mean, you can't survive without that. Those are the people that you are letting go. We can't be efficient if they are not there.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, are you suggesting that the National Park Service today is operating at peak efficiency and that there aren't any changes that I could make?

Senator MURRAY. I would suggest that, I welcome any suggestions to us about how to be efficient. But just mass, across-the-board cuts and firing is really going to increase—not increase efficiency at our parks. And that, I think, we all should be very concerned about.

Secretary BURGUM. But if the goal is for us to have more people working in the parks, you are comfortable if I can get to a spot where we have more people working in the park?

Senator MURRAY. You show me what employees you are leaving behind that don't support someone, that makes sure that they have the equipment that they need, that is up to date, that is running, those kinds of things, you can't just cut those people and expect people to be out in the national parks without somebody who is making sure that their equipment is safe, that their hours are maintained—all the things that it takes to, to run a place. Our national parks are huge. They take a lot of people to run.

Secretary BURGUM. The state is huge. I have run a DOT. I understand the role of support personnel across fish and wildlife, parks and rec, DOT, all of these aspects of a national park are part of running a state. And I am confident that with our team, that we can achieve your objectives and still have a reduction.

WILDLAND FIRE

Senator MURRAY. Well, one thing I am really concerned about, and everybody should be, is our national wildland firefighting efforts, and countless staff who provide the necessary support there. For example, firefighters put their lives at risk without support they need in many different roles. It just gets more dangerous. So those are the kinds of people that I am extremely concerned about that without thought or, you know, really smart moves, that we are going to be putting our parks at risk.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, agree on the wildland firefighters. That is why Secretary Rollins and I yesterday held a joint event reaffirming our commitment to work together between the Forest Service and Interior, and our commitment to have full staffing for wildland firefighters this summer. And we are close to approaching that goal, and so we are fully committed.

INDIAN AFFAIRS

Senator MURRAY. Okay. I appreciate it. And just one really quick question regarding our tribes, you have a role in fulfilling the Federal Government's Trust and Treaty responsibilities to our tribes. I see numerous cuts across the budget that defunds tribal police, putting the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I just want to ask you, how many tribes have you personally consulted with on your budget request?

Secretary BURGUM. I have been meeting with tribes every week since I have been here. I have got a deep understanding of our challenges and shortage in law enforcement.

Senator MURRAY. There is 574 tribes, which ones have you met with; have you consulted or met with?

Secretary BURGUM. I am happy to provide you a list. But I just recently had the Interior Secretary Tribal Advisory Committee. We had 24 representatives from tribes from across the country actually meeting in my office just a couple weeks ago. Law enforcement was a key part of that. We had an opportunity to meet with the family of Emily Pike, I brought Kash Patel over. Of course, it is not just the BIA, it is also the FBI when these cases get escalated. We have over six outlets.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I would just remind all of us that Kash Patel is cutting a \$0.5 billion from his budget on this, so.

Secretary BURGUM. And he is providing 60 people to Indian Country right now to help with the 6,000 unsolved cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women, which is a priority for us.

Senator MURRAY. All of us. And I just want to say that my tribes in Washington State are deeply concerned, they are telling us that these layoffs will eliminate natural resource management, basic social services, and they are horrified. So I hope that in your list that you will provide me, that I see some of their names.

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Murray.

I will turn to Senator Rounds.

And Mr. Secretary, just so you know our votes have started, so you are going to see us popping in and out here.

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Don't take that as lack of interest.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, thank you.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Secretary Burgum. I want to follow up a little bit on the Native American tribes as well, and I just, first of all, I have appreciated the working relationship that you have had with tribes in the North and South Dakota region. And one area in particular that they have expressed concern, and you have heard about it before, and that is that most Great Plains tribal law enforcement agencies are understaffed, and with as few as two officers responsible for patrolling millions of acres during a single shift.

They have come up with a recommendation. They would like to be able to hire more law enforcement officers, but part of the challenge is that, in order to get them set up, they have literally got to travel to New Mexico to get trained. And tribal law enforcement leaders often point to that as being one reason why there is a shortage, because most of these young people coming into that profession don't want to go that far away for 6 months at a time.

So one of the suggestions was, could we also put in or work with—they have the option of doing—work with local law enforcement as well, and being trained such as the South Dakota Law Enforcement Training Center, and so forth, but we would like to have more room for them, perhaps locally. And they may have talked to you about this already. But would you consider working with them in a cooperative effort to perhaps find a way to fund some additional spots in the Northern Great Plains for those law enforcement officers, so they would not have to travel for 6 months down to New Mexico?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. This is an idea I know that you and Senator Hoeven and others have worked on. We have had great

collaboration on advanced training at Camp Grafton, North Dakota. Adding basic training there I think would be helpful for recruiting for Northern Plains Tribes, and I would be fully supportive of that.

Senator ROUNDS. And I think it would save some money as well, just in terms of travel costs.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator ROUNDS. Let me also just suggest, the relationship with our tribal leaders is critical, and they really appreciate the consultation that in some kinds is lacking, and we would like to rebuild that again. Over the last several years, some Great Plains tribes have experienced violent crime rates of up to five times higher than the national average. Tribal leaders have indicated that despite their efforts, these rates remain alarmingly high. Several have proposed establishing a cross-jurisdictional commission to directly address violent crime.

This proposed body could include relevant officials from the Department of the Interior and the Department of Justice. So not just such as you as—and another secretary, but to have a built-in program where your folks could meet with their folks on a regular basis. As the tribal nations continue to deal with threats of public safety, would you consider working with the tribal leaders on this initiative?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, absolutely.

Senator ROUNDS. I think it would really add a lot, and I think we would get a lot of stuff done in a short period of time with that type of a joint commission-type approach. Thank you.

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

And then finally, I want to hit an item with regard to minor fence line disputes. We just went through this with the Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service. So the Department of the Interior land management agencies oversee hundreds of millions of acres of land throughout the United States, laws such as the Federal Land Policy and Management Act authorize a multiple-use approach for public lands, allowing producers to utilize Federal grazing leases.

Concerned landowners in Western South Dakota have approached my office regarding minor fence line disputes between producers and Federal officials, specifically after we had that type of a situation come up with the Department of Ag—with the Department of Forestry. My understanding is that such disagreements are relatively common in areas with a high concentration of Federal land. I am just curious. Do agencies within the Department of the Interior follow a standard mediation process for resolving these issues, or is this something that we need to look at?

Secretary BURGUM. I am not aware, but I would be happy to look at it. I am familiar we have got lots of U.S. grasslands from the U.S. Forest Service in Western North Dakota. I own ranch land there, and I know that when you have got topography in the Badlands that sometimes the fence line—it is impossible to put the fence line on the property line. And so, you know, having these be mediated locally versus escalating into legal action would just be common sense.

Senator ROUNDS. And I think that is the approach we would like to take. These farmers and ranchers have been on that for years. It has been back and forth. And most recently, with the ability to do fence lines more accurately, now we are finding pros and cons in terms of acres that may be on one side of a fence or on the other side of the fence either way. And rather than ending up in court, it seems to me that a mediation process would be a lot better way to approach these. And I would just appreciate your assistance if we can put that together for the Department of the Interior if it does not already exist.

Secretary BURGUM. That would be great.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MULLIN [presiding]. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen, you are next.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you, Senator.

CHESAPEAKE BAY

Welcome, Mr. Secretary. I do want to associate myself with the comments that Senators Merkley and Murray have made, expressing concerns about the budget or the lack of budget to date when it comes to the spend plan for fiscal year 2025. You and I have never met. You come from the beautiful State of North Dakota. I want to tell you a little bit about my State of Maryland and the very important role the Department of the Interior plays in the State of Maryland and seek your assurances on a couple of things.

So one of the world's natural treasures, and one of our country's national treasures, is the Chesapeake Bay, and we need to make sure we preserve the Bay and maintain a healthy Bay, not just because it is a natural wonder, but because big parts of the Maryland economy depend on a healthy Bay. We have the watermen who make their livelihood off the bounty of the Bay. We have a tourism industry that depends on a healthy Bay, sports water—sports fishermen as well as the boating industry, and a whole economic ecosystem around a healthy Bay.

And so the challenge, of course, is how to make it—how to protect it, right, because the Bay watershed encompasses six states and the District of Columbia, you can put something in a stream in parts of New York State and they end up in the Chesapeake Bay. It has a 14:1 land-to-water ratio, which is the largest such ratio of any coastal water body in the world. So you can see that what happens on the land has a direct impact on the health of the Chesapeake Bay.

And the Department of the Interior has a number of very important programs in place to help protect the Bay, its health, and the economy, the health of the economy. One is the Wild Grants program. This is a program that has been bipartisan in origin. Senator Shelley Moore Capito and I launched it. It helps restore and protect fish and wildlife habitat from brook trout in West Virginia, to ruffed grouse in Pennsylvania forests, to oysters in the Chesapeake Bay.

Another very important DOI program is the U.S. Geological Survey. It provides very important science that all of the states use to help develop their strategies to protect the health of the Bay and

guide the restoration efforts. We also have in Maryland a number of national wildlife refuges, seven altogether, that number one, help provide critical habitat around the Bay and prevent more pollution from running off the land into the Bay. They also help provide outdoor opportunities for people who visit the state of Maryland and the Bay.

And then there is the National Park Service, which through the Chesapeake Gateways Partnership provides more public access to the Bay. And then we have a number of important national heritage areas, and the National Park Service plays a very important role in our state, including Antietam National Battlefield, including the Harriet Tubman National Underground Railroad Historic Park, including Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine.

So that is a quick overview of all of the important interaction and investments the Department of the Energy—or Interior has with the State of Maryland.

And so my question to you, Mr. Secretary, is will you work with me, the committee, the Maryland delegation to, number one, maintain that strong partnership, but also to maintain the resources that are necessary to support that partnership?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, absolutely, Senator.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that. And the reason I ask is, as we look at the skinny budget, a number of the categories that are deeply cut would impact almost all of the programs that I just mentioned. I mentioned the WILD Program, for example. If you look at the category of funding and the cuts there, they are very significant. If you look at the National Geological Survey cuts that are being proposed, it appears, although it is hard to determine, that the entire program that supports that scientific work might be wiped out.

I don't know for sure. But this is why we are expressing so many concerns, because this partnership has been very important to our State of Maryland, to the Chesapeake Bay. And so I appreciate, Mr. Secretary, your assurances both in terms of working together and the resources to match that effort. And I look forward to continuing our conversation.

Secretary BURGUM. Great. Thank you.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

WORKFORCE EFFICIENCIES

Senator MULLIN. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen.

Mr. Secretary, thanks for being here. I am the last one up here, so we are going to take some time and answer questions to give people the opportunity to come back.

I wanted to point out, have the duties for the Interior increased by 50 percent over the last 4 years?

Secretary BURGUM. They have not.

Senator MULLIN. If I am not mistaken here, your budget from 2021 to 2024 grew by almost 50 percent.

Secretary BURGUM. That is correct.

Senator MULLIN. So there is probably a lot of room to make changes, right?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. And I think there are ways to make changes where we don't touch programs, but we actually just focus

on reducing overhead, because the overhead burden across the Department and the Bureau is staggering.

CRITICAL MINERALS

Senator MULLIN. Let us talk a little bit more about that. What is your vision of seeing Interior? I mean, because we have a wealth of resources, right, right in front of us, underneath our feet. We are heavily, heavily dependent on, even, I would consider adversaries like China for rare earth minerals. And yet we find that throughout public lands, all over the place. We find that we have an opportunity that we could even use resources not just to allow us to be less dependent or completely independent of other countries, but where we could also use it to pay down a significant amount of debt; is that correct?

Secretary BURGUM. Absolutely. That is true. And you mentioned critical minerals. I think this is something that may have not broken through to the public because there has been a lot going on the last month. But on April 4th, China put on export controls relative to critical minerals. These are things that are essential for American automobiles, for American technology, for American defense. And we have literally—because they control 85 percent of the refining and we do not have strategic mineral reserves like we have a strategic petroleum reserve, and we were literally within 1 month in this country facing the possibility that we were going to run out of minerals, which could have led to shutdowns of factories in the U.S.

I think the general public does not realize the precarious situation we are in. So part of the task that we have is to make sure that we are, for national security purposes and for economic purposes, not put in that position of vulnerability. And it is one of the things that we are working on across the whole-of-government.

But you are absolutely right, Senator, that those critical minerals, many exist in the public lands. But we have killed mining in this country the same way we have killed timber harvesting, the way we have attacked ranching and farming, and certainly the way we have attacked energy development.

Senator MULLIN. And it has become quite a national security risk?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, it is huge. It is one of our largest national security risks—the fact that we are in a great power battle with a country that controls the supply chains for what we need to actually build our defense.

Senator MULLIN. What is the biggest barrier for us to be able to actually retrieve those rare earth minerals?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, I think that this has been a long-term strategy on behalf of China, where they have not just cornered markets, but when U.S. companies, innovators, entrepreneurs, job creators, have said: Hey, I am going to open up a mine, we bury those companies with red tape.

Senator MULLIN. “We” as in the United States?

Secretary BURGUM. Those few that have persevered and become we, the United States, have done that through layers and layers of permitting delays, passing laws that create extra costs, that discourage them from being able to get the capital they need to de-

velop those kinds of either extraction or refining processes. And then, when they finally do, a few of them break through and get successful, and then they are producing a mineral here, then China just dumps and floods the market with the supply that they have, collapsing the price, and then the companies can't exist.

And so they are using their power and state capitalism to actually affect the outcome of companies here. And so between our red tape and their dumping materials, we literally have no critical minerals industry left. And we have got to get back in that game. I mean, it is just incredible, the risk we have put ourselves in.

Senator MULLIN. And I know you are working with the Department of Energy and plus with the President on correcting this, because as I can't overstate, it is a huge national security risk we run. And we literally have it under our feet. And a lot of this is found in tribal land, and tribes that are in reservations that are struggling today, struggling financially. You go to some of these reservations and they literally look like a third-world country.

They don't have the ability to bring gaming in because they are in very rural areas. Their hospitals are in bad shape. Their schools are in bad shape. There is almost no future for those that live there. And yet we could bring that future and that wealth to those tribes if we could get out of our way.

Secretary BURGUM. Yeah, absolutely. And we have been in discussion with one of the tribes in Arizona. I mean, they have got tremendous uranium deposits. And here we are—even though the war in Ukraine has been going on, we are importing enriched uranium from Russia to run our 93 remaining nuclear plants. I mean, some of these things are just absurd, that we have created dependencies around the world on the adversaries that we are actually in, if not in power battles with, or trade battles, we are in proxy wars with them. And it is just insane that we would be dependent on them for, in this case, almost 20 percent of our electricity in this country.

OKLAHOMA LAW ENFORCEMENT

Senator MULLIN. Right. I want to turn my attention to McGirt, a decision that was made by the Supreme Court that has really put law enforcement and law and order at a heavy strain, and it is unique to Oklahoma. We are doing better with it, but I have asked the justice to come in and just brief Oklahoma to kind of see what his envision was. Unfortunately, I met a less than welcome response from the justice, and I am trying to leave his name out of it because I don't want to bring attention to it.

But it has caused a lot of problems. We are greatly under-resourced. I would compare some areas to literally the Wild West. We have law enforcement that cannot pull over individuals with tribal tags. We have tribes that are literally suing the municipalities which they govern in, and it has been a—we could use some help.

There are not enough FBI agents to be able to prosecute, as I met with the FBI in the region, they said we only have time to deal with the most heinous crimes, heinous. And so I know you have been in the same briefings that I have been in, and those heinous crimes are heinous, but there are a lot of crimes behind that are pretty heinous too. And we could use a lot of assistance in that.

And so I would look forward to working with you. And even if the time for us to be able to come in and brief you on it, or get you to Oklahoma at some point, and really do a deep dive, because it has become quite a mess.

Secretary BURGUM. I would welcome the opportunity to get a deeper briefing on how McGirt is playing out. But I do understand that this is one of the most—tribal law enforcement is challenging anyway when you have got states, counties, tribes, overlapping jurisdictions, lack of MOUs, you know, lack of agreements around pursuit and chase, there are all kinds of challenges that I am familiar with. But the McGirt ruling takes it to a whole other level.

Senator MULLIN. Yes.

Secretary BURGUM. And it is literally the most complex law enforcement environment. And that is the kind of environment that law enforcement personnel themselves are saying: Hey, I can't do this. If I can't figure out, when I see an action happening, but I can't do something about it, and I am in law enforcement, because I may not have the jurisdiction.

Senator MULLIN. Right.

Secretary BURGUM. We have created a super complex situation. And I appreciate you, Senator, being so engaged with it, because it is going to take a full effort to try to get this sorted out.

Senator MULLIN. Thank you so much.

I have stalled long enough. I will yield back.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I appreciate the tap dancing. Thank you, Senator Mullin.

Let us go to Senator Heinrich.

NATIONAL PARKS

Senator HEINRICH. Just in time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Secretary, I appreciate our conversations and your responsiveness. I want to bring up what is in the skinny budget and just quote from it real quick: "The National Park Service responsibilities include a large number of sites that are not 'national parks' in the traditionally understood sense, many of which receive small numbers of mostly local visitors and are better categorized and managed as state-level parks."

I just want to strike a note of caution with that sort of approach. I love our big "P" national parks. Behind me is a picture of a non-big-P national park. It is a national preserve. It is the Valles Caldera National Preserve. We have been talking in New Mexico for a hundred years about this being a national park, and we finally settled on the approach of a preserve, in part because we wanted the natural resource management of a national park with the ability to also have world-class hunting and fishing and the visitors that come with all of those things.

So I would just urge you to look, as you develop this list, and many of these units have been created in statute—many of them that are not necessarily a big "P" national park are incredibly important parts of our national park system, our history, and our culture. And I just hope you will approach that with caution.

Secretary BURGUM. Absolutely, and with consultation. And thanks for bringing the beautiful photo behind you.

Senator HEINRICH. Yes, if you get a chance to visit, I highly recommend it. And bring your fly rod.

Secretary BURGUM. Is that you in the photo?

Senator HEINRICH. Actually, it is. Yeah.

Secretary BURGUM. I thought it might be.

Senator HEINRICH. Yes.

Secretary BURGUM. You can tell by the angle of the wrist.

Senator HEINRICH. Have you discussed with any particular states this approach yet, or is it still in the formation stage?

Secretary BURGUM. This is completely in the idea formation stage.

BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Senator HEINRICH. BIE school construction costs. I am not going to question your effectiveness at finding ways to reduce overhead and push forward on-the-ground deployment for better resource management. But this particular account, and I was talking to the Chair about this on the way over, really concerns me. The President's budget calls for a 79 percent, or \$187 million reduction in the BIE school construction account. This is a place where we have a \$4 billion construction backlog. It is not overhead. I mean, this is money to actually build schools. It is not money to pay administrators.

And so, you and I have talked about the incredibly poor condition of some of these BIE schools. How are you going to move the needle on BIE school construction with this budget line item?

Secretary BURGUM. It is interesting that we have got in BIE about 125,000 kids, which is about exactly what we had in North Dakota in our K-12 system. But of course, these are spread across the nation. Not every state has got a BIE school. And we have got a complicated situation that in some places you have got a BIE school next to a tribal school, next to a public school. That is a scenario I have seen. And I think that part of this is we have got to take a look at this system-wide, in terms of dollars coming in. In states like my own state of North Dakota, we put more dollars into BIE than we do into tribal and into public schools. And yet the outcomes are the worst.

When I am wearing my education hat, I am not seeing a correlation. I think the school construction and deferred maintenance is an issue across parks, across refuges. I mean, it is just across all of government, the Federal Government; we have got a deferred maintenance issue. The construction thing I would just set aside, but where I would start my focus on BIE is: How do we improve outcomes for those kids? And then, are there opportunities for us from a school construction standpoint to look for any opportunities with tribes or with public schools to not just fix the problems, but can we do it? I mean, I know there is a case in our state where they are less than a mile apart.

Senator HEINRICH. I think we can both agree we have got to do better for these kids.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

NATIONAL MONUMENTS

Senator HEINRICH. The President's budget proposes an almost \$200 million cut to the Bureau of Land Management conservation programs. In your confirmation hearing, you told me that you would not make any wholesale changes to monument designations in New Mexico without first meeting with local elected leaders and citizen groups in the state. Do I still have your commitment on that?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, absolutely.

Senator HEINRICH. Great. I appreciate that.

Secretary BURGUM. I think you do know there have been concerns, people have come to me about the buffer zone related to that and how it infringes on tribal allottee rights, so we are—yeah, we are listening to all sides of this thing.

Senator HEINRICH. Yes.

Secretary BURGUM. But we will keep in close consultation.

Senator HEINRICH. And that, I think you are talking about a particular mineral withdrawal, and my question was related directly to the monuments which is a separate issue.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator HEINRICH. But I will be happy to engage with you on both.

Secretary BURGUM. Okay.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Heinrich.

Senator Baldwin.

ICE AGE TRAIL

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Secretary Burgum, I am proud to represent a state with two national scenic trails, the North Country and the Ice Age. And I have been hearing from Wisconsinites about some of the workforce cuts and frozen funds under this administration. They have really left the trails critically understaffed and underfunded. And so I would like to ask for you to provide an update on the current funding for maintenance and staffing, particularly for the Ice Age Trail in Wisconsin. I don't know if you are prepared to do that today. If not, I would ask that you do that within the next couple of days?

Secretary BURGUM. I am not prepared to do it right now, but happy to have my team take a look at the trail.

Senator BALDWIN. Okay. And that, you know, the staffing and the maintenance funds?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

Senator BALDWIN. We have had a lot of discussion, and my colleagues have asked a lot of questions about the way in which some of the staffing cuts have been handled, even before your confirmation and the frozen funds. I know this is a hearing to look at the 2026 fiscal year, but I do want to call your attention to some of the impacts that we are seeing. Under your leadership at the Department of Interior, staff have been fired, and funds in some cases have been clawed back that were supporting research into foundational science, for freshwater ecosystem, health, and fisheries, wildlife disease prevention, and agriculture and economic sustainability.

UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

While the President asserts that his administration—well, he distanced himself from Project 2025, as you are well familiar, nonetheless, it is following through with the playbook's vision by attempting to abolish the Biological Resources Division of the United States Geological Survey. So can you share with me the mission of the Biological Resources Division?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, I think I will just talk in general about the evolution of USGS over time, because this was—

Senator BALDWIN. Well, I am particularly interested in this division.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. Well, this division was one that was not part of the original scope of USGS. It was added. And the review that we are taking on this division is because one of the original scopes was actually mapping, and it seems that there are a number of things that, as you referred to in biological, that might be better suited to be in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service versus in USGS.

Senator BALDWIN. Okay. Well, I want to share some of the concerns I have been hearing regularly about the biological services funding and staffing cuts. Roughly a 100 people are or were employed in Madison and 80 more at a location in La Crosse, Wisconsin, until they began to be fired in March. In La Crosse, these scientists have dedicated their professional lives to studying invasive—studying and tracking invasive carp, which decimate ecosystems and commercial fishing operations.

They have been focused on restoring habitats along the Mississippi River, which improves surface water quality for farms and navigation for the shipping industry. They are studying PFAS to understand the impacts of those chemicals on wildlife. In the USGS National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, it is by the way, the only center dedicated to wildlife disease detection, control, and prevention in the United States.

And in Madison, they have been making progress on monitoring the avian flu pandemic through their work at the Wildlife Health Center. So I would like your commitment to reverse the budget's intent to abolish the Biological Resources Division. And instead, we need to really invest in our nation's ability to respond to threats to our natural resources and wildlife health by funding these centers and their staffs in Wisconsin. Can I have your commitment on that?

Secretary BURGUM. I will not provide that commitment right now. Obviously these are important priorities. We have important priorities everywhere. But of course, one of the things that we also think is an important priority is as a nation, when we have a trillion-dollar interest cost, and we spent last year 2,000 billion dollars more than we brought in, I think that every Department in this administration feels a responsibility to try to find a way, that even though the work is important, how do we prioritize to spend less money to help bring our overall budget in balance.

Senator BALDWIN. I think you would find the economic impacts of funding these missions are enormous. On the invasive carp, for example, were they to ever get into the Great Lakes system, the

ecological damage is almost unimaginable. I want to—actually, I notice I have run out of time.

I do have some questions that I will submit for the record relating to the rights protection implementation line in the Interior and Environment Appropriation Bills that helps fulfill the Federal treaty, trust, and contract obligations to tribes. And I do have some specific questions that I will submit for the record. I hope you will get back to me quickly.

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you, Senator.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Baldwin.

Senator Ossoff?

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Secretary, welcome. How are you?

Secretary BURGUM. I am great.

OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Senator OSSOFF. Mr. Secretary, are you familiar with the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia?

Secretary BURGUM. I am not familiar. No.

Senator OSSOFF. I would love to get you down to visit. Can you do that?

Secretary BURGUM. I would love to get to Georgia.

Senator OSSOFF. We would love to welcome you to visit the Okefenokee. It is one of our state's great treasures, one of the most beautiful, biodiverse wildlife refuges in North America, the largest blackwater swamp of its kind in North America. There is an effort with bipartisan support that the previous administration supported to secure UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the Okefenokee. This has strong bipartisan support among local officials, state officials in Georgia, former Governor Sonny Perdue, Lieutenant Governor Burt Jones among them.

Will you continue to support our efforts to secure UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the Okefenokee, which is now in your purview as part of a national wildlife refuge system?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, I am certainly interested in learning more about it. But I know that is a lengthy process so I would love to understand all the implications of supporting, and if there are budget implications for Interior. But I am certainly happy to take a look at it.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, we need your support. We need to get you down there as well to spend some time at the refuge. I know there has been some public discussion about the sale of public lands. Can you give an unequivocal guarantee that you will not pursue any sale of any part of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

NORCROSS, GA WATER SCIENCE CENTER

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you so much for that. Mr. Secretary, I wrote you a letter on April 10th about an apparent effort by DOGE to close the U.S. Geological Survey Office in Norcross, Georgia. This is the Water Science Center in Norcross. It plays a critical role in ensuring water quality for folks in Metro Atlanta. Did you receive that letter?

Secretary BURGUM. I am certain that our team did.

Senator OSSOFF. I have not received a response. It has been about six weeks, any reason for that?

Secretary BURGUM. No specific reason other than how incredibly short-staffed we are as we are trying to ramp up.

Senator OSSOFF. Can you get back more promptly in the future?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. As we just said earlier, we have zero of our 16 Senate-confirmed leaders on board. The first one is coming on Tuesday after Memorial Day. And so as we get our leadership team in place, I am sure our operations will—

Senator OSSOFF. We need timely responses to those kinds of inquiries, Mr. Secretary. And the staff at this office test water quality to ensure that Georgians don't drink contaminated water. Senator Warnock and I have asked you not to close this office. No justification for such closure was offered. There is significant public concern in Georgia about the potential impact on water quality. Am I correct that you have abandoned those plans or overruled the DOGE effort to close that office in Norcross?

Secretary BURGUM. I am not familiar with the—when you are saying “closure”, I know that there was an effort to take a look at all the real estate we had, particularly the fact that virtually every employee in Interior was working remotely, and yet we were paying hundreds of millions of dollars in real estate bills. And so I think it was reasonable that we took a look to say, do we need the real estate? But I am not sure when you are saying closing the office if you are talking about the positions, or about an office lease, because I know some office leases were being considered removed and some have been supposed to—

Senator OSSOFF. Yes, but DOGE expressed its intent to close the U.S. Geological Survey Water Science Center in Norcross, Georgia. You have heard from me and Senator Warnock our opposition, as I mentioned, there is tremendous public concern. Are you still planning to close that office?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, we will certainly take this particular request under consultation, and our team will be in discussion with you and your team about that.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Well, with respect, Mr. Secretary, this is an issue that I raised about a month and a half ago with you.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes, I understand that.

Senator OSSOFF. So when can I expect a response?

Secretary BURGUM. Soon.

OCMULGEE NATIONAL PARK INITIATIVE

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Let me raise with you the ongoing bipartisan effort to establish Georgia's first ever national park. This is the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative. Congressman Austin Scott, Republican in the House, and I are leading a bipartisan, bicameral group of the Georgia delegation in order to establish this national park and preserve. For the first time, made major progress in the U.S. Senate last Congress on this effort, overwhelming local support in the Macon area for getting this done. We have been grateful for the Department's past support providing technical assistance to help us move that forward. Will you continue to provide that support?

Secretary BURGUM. We are happy to engage with you and take a look at this proposal and this project.

Senator OSSOFF. Okay. Mr. Secretary, my time has expired. I know you are getting up to speed and staffing up. Would appreciate more intensity of engagement on some of these Georgia concerns, and look forward to sitting down with you, and welcoming you to the state to work with you in Georgia's interest. Thank you so much.

Secretary BURGUM. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Ossoff.

DOI EFFICIENCY

Well, as you can tell, Mr. Secretary, everyone wants a piece of what goes on in the Department, because the role and the responsibilities there are very, very key. We are going to have an opportunity for a second round here, and rather than going into some of the particulars and the details, I am probably going to stick to more generic.

But you and I have had a conversation about really understanding and being able to value the assets that we have when it comes to our public lands. As I am looking at the skinny budget, and I look at USGS and see close to a 40 percent reduction from current levels, 38.9, I worry about things like what happens with mapping, USGS's Earth MRI, the three DEP programs, just to understand where our mineral reserves are.

So I am hoping that as you are going forward, you are looking at the level of cuts, and you are looking outward to say: All right, what is it, where are we going to create additional value when we have better understanding? And I think we would both agree that being able to identify that is going to be really critical for the mission going forward.

So I don't necessarily need your comment to that other than you are nodding and you are giving me a yes there.

Secretary BURGUM. Yes.

NATIONAL PARKS

Senator MURKOWSKI. So I am good with that. I also understand from the discussion here today, a lot of interest with what may be forthcoming with regards to the Park Service and what it may mean for states to be managing some of these assets. I certainly have a lot of questions. I am not quite sure which national parks are actually considered crown jewel parks. I know what I consider them to be. I just don't know if there is a category that says "crown jewel parks", and if so, where Alaska's parks kind of stack up on this.

So what I am hearing from you is this is very much in the preliminary stages of discussion. As things advance, not only the Chair and the Ranking will be brought in, but the many of us who have questions in these areas will be read into, to more of the details?

Secretary BURGUM. Yes. And quick clarification, the national parks with a capital "N" capital "P", the 63 National Parks, none of those are under consideration for transfer. That would include all the national parks in Alaska. Most of these are historic sites,

cultural sites that, as you said, have got low visitation that is primarily local, that might better fit into a state historic society site, or some other designation.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yeah. Well, it is good to hear that on the Alaska side specifically, because, as you know, many of these areas are so remote and so very difficult to access that if you are just using the metric of how many people have visited, you would say: All right, well, yeah, these come off the books. But that is not the case. And I appreciate that recognition.

DOI REPROGRAMMING

And we have received an official reprogramming request from the Department to consolidate, to unify, to optimize a lot of the administrative functions. We are still trying to get additional details to make an informed decision on the reprogramming. So again, as I mentioned at the outset, just the opportunity for staffs to be able to sit down and go through that level of detail. I don't want to take your valuable time on a phone call. This is something that I think both of our teams could benefit from, from just a real considered analysis of that.

INSULAR AFFAIRS

I want to raise an issue that has not been raised here yet today, and this is that section of your portfolio that relates to insular affairs. I know that you have got perhaps a special and a personal interest in the region, given your father's history, but looking at the skinny budget, it really doesn't give any insight as to what may happen within the Office of Insular Affairs.

I have had, over the years, built some good relationships with folks out there, and I hear their concerns. I met just recently with Congresswoman King-Hinds from the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas, just talking about their disastrous economic conditions out there. I was in Palau in October and talking to them about making sure that, again, when we have made commitments, as a country, for Federal assistance under certain compacts that were there.

So I don't know if you have any comments, if you have any updates in terms of persons that you have identified to head up the office. But I just want you to know that while we might not talk about it a lot at the committee, we do recognize that this is an aspect of Interior that oftentimes is kind of out of sight out of mind, and we don't regard that as such.

Secretary BURGUM. I think it was maybe my first week or my second week after confirmation, we held a meeting that included all the governors and representatives from the countries and the islands that we were involved with in insular affairs. We also invited Puerto Rico to join that discussion.

Senator MURKOWSKI. That is right.

Secretary BURGUM. Several of those governors, including from Guam, I have had a relationship with through the Western Governors Association, and know some of them personally. We just, in the last two weeks, got a leader on board, and an assistant. One of those folks on that team is from the Mariana Islands. That is the first time that we have had someone from there. So he has re-

ceived some press locally back home. I was also able to recruit a seasoned, long-time executive from the cellular industry, who I have known personally for a long time, who helped bring cellular service across all these islands.

Interestingly, when he came out of law school, he interviewed in-person for a Federal judgeship on Palau. And so he is familiar with islands, islands' economies, island infrastructure, and he is en route right now for his first trip. He started two weeks ago, got up to speed, and he is out visiting them. And I know that we are going to have a lot of intel coming back from that trip.

This is all very tied into defense. Yes, we have economic issues, but China has been working in the oceans on three sides of American Samoa. Just this week we announced for the first time that we are going to be offering a potential lease sale offshore in American Samoa for critical mineral development on the seafloor. Again, if we can bring economic activity back to support their economy but also assert our rights relative to those being U.S. waters versus the activity that China has done.

So I think we are going to be working very closely with the Department of Defense. Of course, Guam, as you know, has got a huge defense presence for us. But we have neglected some of these areas, both economically and strategically, and our intention is to make sure that we are—they are all, they are all essential for both those reasons, both strategic and economic. And we have responsibility, but we take it very seriously, and I am excited about the team we are putting in place.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I appreciate you sharing that.

I will defer to my colleague now, Senator Merkley.

FEDERAL APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

Senator MERKLEY. So here on the committee, when we put into law the strategy, we specify several things that are specific activities locked into law, but many, many others are in report language. And that report language is designed to give the administration flexibility. And that creates kind of a dialogue about the administration saying: Well, we would like to not do that, and do a little more over here, and so on and so forth. But it also means that there is a desire for Congress be the—to have the thinking behind the report language honored and discussed.

So a spending plan is due to us, and you all provided one, and a normal spending plan, and I am just going to show one for the Geological Service. This is six pages. And if you want to know what we are going to spend on harmful algae blooms, it is in here. If you want to know what we are going to do for ShakeAlert, which is a tsunami warning system, very, very important to us on the West Coast, and so forth, it is all here.

So the spending plan is very, very detailed, giving us information both on the things we put into law but also on the plan as related to the things we put into report language. When we received your spending plan, and I am just using Geological Service as an example, it has three lines. It has a total amount, which would be found in a normal six-page spending plan, and two subaccounts that constitute 12 percent of the spending for the Department, which

means 88 percent of this spending plan, we have no idea what you are going to do now.

Now let me take ShakeAlert as that example, in Oregon, the effort has been extensive, we have earthquakes every year, someday we will have a massive one. We had a harbor virtually destroyed in Southern Oregon near the boundary of Oregon and California from an earthquake that happened in Japan. Because of the formation of the underwater mountains it channeled that energy right towards that spot across the entire Pacific Ocean. So you can imagine if there is a nearby earthquake or a really big one, we are in big trouble.

So our work is kind of at a loss, and all these folks out there in all these individual programs are in these six pages. They don't know if they are getting funding or not, and yet we are nearing the end of the fiscal year. So how do we get from what—the two subaccounts that you sent us were ones we had locked into law. So technically, you have met the letter of the law, but certainly not the spirit of having this dialogue over these various programs. And yet we are trying to prepare our strategy for next year.

We always kind of realized if there wasn't a good-faith effort to honor the reporting language, we could put every one of these sublines locked into law. But that takes away the flexibility. So it has been a mutually beneficial arrangement. When can we get a spending plan that isn't just the two subaccounts that constitute only 12 percent of the—and that was just the USGS as an example?

I mean, massive amount of every other part of Interior, it is the same story. So if the entire, you know, massive spending plan with details versus just—this is the entire Department spending plan right here. How do we address this? And what is the holdup for getting a vision for all these individual pieces that were laid out in what we put into the report language?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, if you talk about the vision, the one thing coming in, having spent all those decades in tech and specifically around financial and accounting systems, with this Federal budgeting process and the tools, it would be very easy for us to give you that six-page sheet and just take what is in there, increase the number a little bit, hand it to you, everybody is familiar with it, and go. But it is the systems themselves and the information and how they flow that needs an entire overhaul.

And I know we cannot get it done now, but certainly we are taking a look at that as we bring in a new team, a new IT team, and because we want to have a collaborative process, we want to work with you. We want to do that. But we also want to figure out a way to make sure that we are spending dollars and getting good return on them. It is not how much we spend it is also the results that we get.

Senator MERKLEY. So here is the challenge: the spending plan is about fiscal year 2025, which started last October 1st. So I take the point about as you produce a strategy for a detailed budget for fiscal year 2026, for us to have a starting point for discussion. But for fiscal year 2025, all of these individual programs are going, we cannot be efficient. We are suspending our design work. We are suspending our contractors. It is all going up in price, all because we can't—we don't know if our funds are going to be obliterated be-

cause they are in the report language. So you could move them from place to place.

And so it is massively inefficient. And what I have heard is a theme of your desire is to be efficient. But you have got all of these subprograms all operating inefficiently right now because you have got people standing around going: We don't know what we are doing because we don't have the money, and we don't know if we are ever going to get it. How is that a good strategy?

Secretary BURGUM. Well, it is a necessary effort that we are going through right now. Because you mentioned contractors, the explosion in the number of contractors working for Interior, go way beyond the 65,000 estimated headcount. And in some cases, it appears that we may have team members whose job is to manage contractors. And so then it leads us back to, you know, is that work that we should be doing ourselves versus outsourcing to others? And why the huge increase in contractors in the last couple of years? Did we suddenly find that we are unable to do this work ourselves?

So there are a lot of questions that I think would be reasonable to ask, because those answers that we will get from looking at 2025 help inform what we should put in the budget for 2026. You know, what is working, what is not, what is efficient, what are we doing internally versus outsourcing. So anyway, and with a small staff, we are asking a lot, and I think the——

Senator MERKLEY. I would take your point looking forward. When I ran nonprofits, I tried to do things in-house, not use sub-contractors at all, because I could do it much more efficiently, get much more work done, I had complete control. But this is about work that is underway right now being interrupted with no idea what is happening, we have no idea how many canceled contracts. So that work, that is very inefficient. I mean, looking forward to what you want to fund next year, I take your point about this analysis.

But for this fiscal year 2025, what contracts are there with all of these to execute the construction work on new ShakeAlert, or the new algae research, or what biologists are standing by waiting to know if they are going to complete that work? And to me, it is horrifically inefficient to interrupt all of that work, nobody knowing what is happening. They don't know.

And I understand that technically it is a pause, but it is a pause leading to an obliteration of that program, even for the things that were in there for fiscal year '25, or so forth. Anyway, I want to make that point, that looking to the future, huge control by the executive. Looking to fiscal year 2025, I am sure there are individual items you are like: Well, we want to adjust what we did in fiscal year 2025. And that is why we put them into report language rather than locking them into law.

But this is the worst outcome, where we have no idea, and all these programs have no idea if they are getting the money. So I have heard that OMB has locked this up, preventing you from being able to actually give us a spending plan; is that correct?

Secretary BURGUM. We are waiting for some of the apportionments from OMB, yes.

Senator MERKLEY. Can you connect with Mr. Vought and tell him this is horrifically inefficient for fiscal year 2025 and you need to be able to let these programs operate or not operate, be canceled, or get their funding, and not be standing around waiting for words and expertise.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, we are in regular communication with OMB. And again, I think perhaps when both of you were out of the room, at the administration level, last year we spent 2,000 billion dollars as a government, more than we brought in. I mean, that is what two trillion is.

And so while these numbers may seem small, each of us as a department has been asked to do something to help rein in spending to get that number. Interest now passes \$1 trillion, we can get that number down, we can fund everything we have talked about here today.

Senator MERKLEY. I will say that your spending plan has the same amount, for example, for the Geological Service, as we put in. So you are not saving a damn dime. What you are doing is interrupting every subaccount and every team that is working on these different projects. So again, looking forward, I take your point. Looking at fiscal year 2025, I do not.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, respectfully, they are connected, because understanding, for me to decide whether they should be in the budget for 2026, I need to know what they are actually doing in 2025, and whether we are doing it ourselves or doing it with a contractor. So while you are saying they are not connected, I think they are completely connected in terms of us having information about how we—what would we fund going forward based on what we learn about this year's appropriations.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, it is hard to learn much about this year if you don't ever get a spending plan implemented, and the year is over or half gone. It ends on September 30th. For example, the Whitewater Conservation—

Secretary BURGUM. But you are not saying that this is not intentional. I mean, this is like we came in during the middle of the fiscal year. I mean, this is a transition year. This must happen in the Government every 4 years.

Senator MERKLEY. Actually, we get a much more detailed spending plan from other administrations in transition. This is a rare exception. I will just give—

Secretary BURGUM. Oh. This is the first administration that is actually trying to reduce spending instead of increase it. So maybe that is the difference.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, you are not the first administration that has looked for efficiencies, but my point is you are creating vast inefficiencies while you are bragging about doing efficiencies. And therefore, you really need to be honest with the American public about the damage you are doing to the institutional knowledge and the fact that people are standing around waiting for their funding, not knowing that projects are interrupted and they are going up in cost.

All of these are not factors you should be bragging about to the American people, because they are inefficiencies. They are wasting our American money. Look to fiscal year 2026, see your changes

that you want, but don't come here and tell us that by interrupting programs and running up costs that you are doing something efficient.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I think that telling.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, and I just want to be clear, I am not bragging about anything. There is no bragging going on. I mean, we all share this. We are all Americans, and we are all facing the same overspending problem.

Senator MERKLEY. I just heard you say that you are the only folks in the history of the country that have looked to create lower costs. That is just not true. And so you are bragging about that, but you are disrupting programs and making them less efficient.

I am going to turn this back to the Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yes. I think the point that needs to be made here is when we are dealing with a full-year CR, which in my view was an awful alternative, it was the one that helped us avoid a Government shutdown, which was a worse alternative, but you are stuck with the proposal. We are stuck with not knowing how you are going to implement it. And it goes back to what I have asked for, and I think the ranking member is suggesting that we have all got to have more detail to it.

And I would agree, you need to be clearly focused on what is happening with fiscal year 2026, but we cannot ignore where we are with fiscal year 2025. And our job as appropriators here is not insignificant. We are still the ones that, ultimately, we have made that determination at the executive. Your role is to implement it. And so how we get through this fiscal year 225, I think, is the frustration that my colleague has pointed to. I share it. This is why we have asked about the reprogramming.

What we need is to have just more openness, more detail. And I get the fact that it is really hard to be able to provide that when you don't have your folks. So we are in an awful spot. The best way that we can remedy things is just for everybody to recognize this is not a place where anybody wants to be. It is a challenge and a transition. I don't think most transitions from one administration to another are quite as rocky, because typically we don't leave you with a long-term CR. You are able to walk in and know what the game plan is. And there may be minor reprogramming, but nothing to the extent that we are seeing now.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE

So our second vote has started, and I think we are well into that. I had more things that I wanted to raise on the public safety and justice side. I worry about tribal governments competing for grants within DOJ or Homeland. As you well know, coming from your states, you have certain tribes that just have greater capacity to compete for such funds. And so we don't want this to be a situation where it is only the most sophisticated and the wealthy tribes that are able to gain access to this.

ALASKA ISSUES

I am also worried about whether the reduction in the safety and justice line assumes a reduction in funding for PL280 states, which is Alaska's situation. So I would love to have more conversations

with you on that. I think we have raised the issue of BIA probate enough so that you know how much of a priority that is and making sure that we can really help to expedite that.

I am going to end my comments with just again, I think there is an excitement from folks in my state that not only you are coming to the state in a couple weeks, but Secretary Wright, as well as Administrator Zeldin. I kind of gave you a pass on what can we expect when you come up. You can deliver that at the time. But I think that there is a lot of anticipation about what the executive order is actually going to translate to in terms of forward momentum that we can actually see. What is it going to mean in terms of jobs, in terms of projects moving forward?

And I know that you are working aggressively to that, and believe me, it is appreciated. There are so many things within this budget, and I think as a governor who gets budgets, and a businessman who gets budgets, you recognize this is a massive undertaking. I think that is why the President asked you to take it on, because he knew of the expertise that you bring to the table. But regardless of how good you are, you need folks to help you make it happen.

So view us as partners here, helping to facilitate what you are trying to do. We can help you on the appropriations end, and that is certainly my desire.

And with that, Senator Merkley, have you had any finals, we are ready to close out.

WILDAND FIRE BUDGET

Senator MERKLEY. A closing question. The President's budget proposes to jettison parts of the Forest Service and put it into the Department of the Interior related to a different structure for fighting fires. And the question I have is whether that is a proposal for us to consider legislatively, or if you believe you can make that reorganization without us acting legislatively?

Secretary BURGUM. I don't think we have a conclusive answer yet on that. If we find that it is something that we think has got deep merit that requires legislative action, we will certainly be working with you on that. If it is something that we think deserves merit and we can execute it between Brooke Rollins and I moving forward, we will do it the way that we can get the most efficiency. You know, we do have some good collaboration going on at the National Interagency Coordination Incident Center in Idaho.

I mean, that is a good thing. But we have got four different wildland firefighting units in Interior. We have got one inside the Forest Service. We don't even have the same pay scales. You know, the Forest Service people have a casualty thing if they are killed in action, or if they are seriously injured. That doesn't exist for BIA firefighters.

So we have got to figure out a way to get some unification. It doesn't mean moving people around, but we have got to get some things where we have a national force that is nationally coordinated. You know, last year we had a 124,000-acre fire in North Dakota. Sadly, two people died. And we were calling for Federal air support on Saturday morning, and the planes arrived on Tuesday. And there were planes available, but it was the—you know, the bu-

reaucracy of decisionmaking and the layers that are there. And so I think that there are places where we can absolutely streamline.

Brooke Rollins and I held a joint event yesterday. We did a fire incident briefing together at the U.S. Forest Service. That has never happened before. And so whether it is making sure that we are providing support to those critical people, the frontline firefighters, all the way up through the top of both agencies, and both Departments. We are going to make sure that we have got the best wildland firefighting coordination than ever before.

And when we put that all together, then we may come back and go: Man, we are short. We need more aircraft. We need more places. We need more people. But one thing for sure we need is more fire load management, because we are spending way too much money on the back end. I know this as being Vice Chair and Chair of Western Governors, we talked about fire every year for 8 years, and when the fuel load is building, the fires are getting bigger, we have got to figure out a way to get more.

REORGANIZATION

Senator MERKLEY. Let me say thank you for that detail. And here is the point, is that we are all for coordination, we are all for efficiency. But I think it is the opinion of Members of Congress that when you have an organization established in law, changing that organization requires a change in law. We have seen a number of agencies affected profoundly in ways that were not consistent with law. So do the planning. Send us a proposal. I think we should wrestle with it. We want the fire service to be as effective as possible. It is so critical to certainly both of our states and the entire West.

But what we don't want is something done without due consideration that creates more problems than it solves. And we don't want to do something that breaks the Constitutional separation of powers. I guarantee you that will end up in court, and there will be pieces of that that result in more difficulty than a two-day delay on planes, which is a big issue for sure. But what if we produce a seven-day delay as a result of a poorly crafted, poorly considered reorganization? So bring us the reorganization plan. Let us do this the right way.

Secretary BURGUM. Well, we look forward to working with you.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

[The following questions were not asked at the hearing, but were submitted to the Department for response subsequent to the hearing:]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO HON. DOUGLAS BURGUM

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Question. Given the severe and ongoing staffing reductions within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—including a reduction of over 40% at the Columbia River Gorge Hatchery Complex—and the May 2, 2025 “Personnel Actions Freeze” memorandum prohibiting new hires, reassignments, and changes in duty stations, how does the Department specifically plan to meet its legal and trust obligations under congressional mandates, Federal court orders—such as the 2018–2027 United States v. Oregon Consent Decree—and Treaty commitments to Columbia Basin Tribes?

Specifically, how will the Department ensure continued operation of critical fish hatcheries that support endangered salmon and steelhead recovery efforts and fulfill the Treaty-reserved fishing rights of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Community of Oregon, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Yakama Indian Reservation, and Nez Perce Tribes?

Answer. Working together with the affected Tribes, FWS is undertaking a multi-phased effort to ensure continuity of operations at the Columbia River Gorge Complex, in accordance with the *US v. Oregon Consent Decree*. We are maintaining fish welfare and meeting salmon production targets with current FWS staffing. When activities, such as spawning, require additional staff, FWS is working with the US v. Oregon Parties to solicit additional help from States and Tribes. FWS continues to hire seasonal employees to implement its mission as it embraces new opportunities for optimization and innovation in workforce management.

Question. The Tribes have indicated that current staffing levels are insufficient to maintain operations, and Tribal governments are being forced to compensate for Federal shortfalls at their own expense. How does the Federal Government plan to reimburse the Tribes for the staff and other resources that they are using to cover the Federal Government's shortfall?

Answer. FWS is undertaking a multi-phased effort to ensure continuity of operations at the Columbia River Gorge Complex. We are maintaining fish welfare and meeting salmon production targets with current FWS staffing. FWS continues to hire seasonal employees to assist with peak spawning season. FWS has not requested nor received funding from Tribes for our hatchery operations. Questions about compensation to Tribes are best addressed by NOAA, which has the lead for distribution of mitigation funds under the *US v. Oregon Consent Decree*.

Question. I am aware that the Department prematurely opened a Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) and Deferred Resignation Program (DRP) portal for Bureau of Indian Affairs staff from May 9–16, 2025, before the scheduled Tribal consultations on “Workforce Optimization” had even begun. This occurred amidst growing concern that these actions are prelude to a significant Reduction in Force (RIF), which has not been shared with Congress.

What explanation can you provide for taking action to reduce the BIA workforce before engaging in Tribal consultation?

Answer. The Deferred Resignation/Retirement Program (DRP) and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) are voluntary and effective tools to allow Indian Affairs to implement workforce efficiency strategies. We conducted the DRP/VERA as many Indian Affairs employees expressed interest in this voluntary opportunity. Once consultation is complete and the written comment period has ended, Indian Affairs will develop a consultation summary before developing a reorganization plan for workforce efficiency. It is important to note the DRP/VERA implementation is distinct from a Reduction in Force.

Question. How does the Department reconcile this legal and moral obligation to engage in meaningful government-to-government consultation with Tribes, particularly when these workforce reductions will directly undermine the already under-resourced BIA's ability to meet treaty and trust responsibilities?

Answer. The Deferred Resignation/Retirement Program (DRP) and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) are voluntary and effective tools and are distinct from broader reorganizations or workforce efficiency strategies. Critical occupations in areas including public safety which includes law enforcement, social services, and engineering positions for infrastructure, were exempted from participation in the DRP. Other areas like realty functions related to permitting were also excluded. As Indian Affairs moves forward with workforce efficiency planning following consultation, we will continue to evaluate appropriate program staffing levels.

Question. Given the Department of the Interior's solemn obligation to uphold the Federal Government's trust and treaty responsibilities to Tribes—including the duty to conduct early, meaningful, and robust government-to-government consultation—why has the Department failed to schedule an in-person Tribal consultation in the Pacific Northwest, a region home to many federally recognized Tribes likely to be significantly impacted by the proposed restructuring of Indian Affairs?

Answer. The Department has conducted nine total consultations, seven in-person and two virtual. All the in-person consultations (except Bismarck, ND) supported a virtual participation capability so that Tribal leaders could provide input at any of the consultations. Northwest Tribal leaders participated in multiple sessions both in person and virtually.

Question. Further, will Tribes be provided a genuine and fully informed opportunity to engage in additional consultation once a detailed restructuring plan is available, rather than being asked to respond to sweeping changes they have not

seen, through an expedited and seemingly procedural process that risks undermining the trust relationship and the Department's legal obligations?

Answer. Tribal consultation will be conducted consistent with standards required by law and as needed to uphold the Department's trust responsibility. The Department will continue fulfilling its longstanding commitment to consult with Tribes as we work through designing and implementing program improvements and efficiencies.

Question. Tribal law enforcement programs under the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) are critically underfunded and understaffed, especially in Public Law 83-280 States like Oregon where jurisdictional challenges complicate public safety efforts. The Department's proposed "skinny budget" recommends cutting \$107 million from BIA Public Safety and Justice programs to "reduce redundancies" and "improve accountability," a move that risks undermining the safety of Tribal communities and the Federal trust responsibility.

Given and that the FBI proposed a similar reduction in funding for any program that could support this effort, how does the Department plan to ensure that the BIA Office of Justice Services can deliver meaningful improvements in accountability and service to Tribal communities facing chronic resource shortages?

Answer. Reducing redundancies in management to make the service more efficient will allow available resources to be shifted to needed "Boots on the Ground" and prioritize the critical frontline vacancies across Indian Country. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services evaluating Central Office functions such as the Division of Drug Enforcement, Missing and Murdered Unit, and Internal Affairs to more respond to Tribal needs and emergency situations.

Question. Will you commit to working with Tribes to fully assess and address Tribal law enforcement's true funding needs before implementing cuts that could further jeopardize public safety?

Answer. The Department will continue to fulfill our longstanding commitment to consult regularly with Tribes as we work through designing and implementing program improvements and efficiencies.

Question. Given that the Department's proposed Reduction in Force may disproportionately impact key personnel at the Bureau of Reclamation's (BOR's) Umatilla Field Office in Hermiston—which manages critical infrastructure such as McKay and Cold Springs Reservoirs, diversion dams, and pumping plants essential to the congressionally authorized Umatilla Basin Project, a unique collaborative effort involving the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the State of Oregon, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Bonneville Power Administration, BOR, and local irrigation districts that supports both irrigated agriculture and fisheries restoration—what steps is the Department taking to ensure this office retains adequate staffing and resources to maintain reliable water delivery to farmers, support fisheries restoration efforts, and protect the economic health of the Umatilla Basin without disruption to irrigators, Tribal partners, and environmental restoration?

Will the Department commit to consulting closely with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, local irrigation districts, and other stakeholders to assess and address current and future staffing or resource gaps at the Umatilla Field Office before implementing any additional reductions, to ensure the continued success of this vital collaborative project and prevent negative impacts on both agricultural and environmental priorities in the basin?

Answer. The Department of the Interior recognizes the importance of managing infrastructure critical to the Umatilla Basin Project, which supports irrigated agriculture, Tribal partnerships, and fisheries restoration. The Department is committed to meeting its trust and treaty responsibilities and to working closely with Tribal, State and local partners and stakeholders as we move forward on implementing efficiencies as we meet our mission requirements.

We note that the Umatilla Project sees an increase in the President's FY 2026 Budget compared to FY 2025 (\$85K).

Question. As I mentioned in the hearing, it is essential that our public lands remain in public hands, so they are accessible to all Americans, both now and in the future. Will you state your position on whether the Department has the authority for the disposal or sale of public lands without an opportunity for public input or without following the Federal land use planning processes required by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act, and other statutory authorities?

Answer. Quite simply, any sale or disposal of Federal lands under the current jurisdiction of the Department will be done in accordance with law.

Question. I want to ascertain the Department's readiness for the 2025 fire season: On May 21, 2025, what was the total number of wildland firefighters by bureau? What was the number of employees holding "red cards"? Please include employees

that have accepted employment offers as of that date, even if the first day of employment had not yet occurred.

Answer. The Department is ready for the 2025 fire season. As of May 21, 2025, Interior had a total 4,571 wildland fire personnel, including firefighters and support personnel who are critical to incident response and other important wildland fire management.

The total number of employees qualified to respond to wildfires (i.e., those who hold “red cards”) as of May 21, 2025, was 7,109. This number includes Interior’s public safety personnel (e.g., law enforcement officers), as well as wildland firefighters and support personnel. It also includes personnel who support wildfire incident response as a collateral duty when called upon.

Between January 20 and May 21, 2025, 2,504 people accepted offers of employment from Interior’s wildland fire management program.

Question. On May 21, 2024, what was the total number of wildland firefighters by bureau? What was the number of employees holding “red cards”? Please include employees that have accepted employment offers as of that date, even if the first day of employment had not yet occurred.

Answer. As of May 21, 2024, Interior had a total 4,839 wildland fire personnel, including firefighters and support personnel who are critical to incident response and other important wildland fire management.

The total number of employees qualified to respond to wildfires (i.e., those who hold “red cards”) as of May 21, 2024, was 6,454. This number includes Interior’s public safety personnel (e.g., law enforcement officers), as well as wildland firefighters and support personnel. It also includes personnel who support wildfire incident response as a collateral duty when called upon.

Between January 20 and May 21, 2024, 3,045 people accepted offers of employment from Interior’s wildland fire management program.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH

Question. In order to have robust waterfowl populations in the United States that can be sustainably hunted, waterfowl need intact stopover and breeding habitat across the continent. The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) supports this effort. When will the Department release frozen NAWCA funding?

Answer. The Department is currently reviewing grant funding to ensure alignment with Administration priorities.

Question. The President’s proposed budget cuts include steep reductions in funding for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). How will the Bird Banding Lab continue to function amidst these cuts and the plan to fire approximately 1,000 USGS staff?

Answer. The 2026 Budget does not request funding for the Bird Banding Lab in order for the bureau to focus on core mission activities.

Question. The USGS partners with the Department of Agriculture to study Chronic Wasting Disease’s (CWD) transmission and distribution. Given the drastic cuts to the USGS budget, how will the Department continue to manage the spread of CWD so that sportsmen know their local deer and elk populations are not at risk?

Answer. The 2026 Budget does not request funding for the Ecosystems Mission Area in order for USGS to focus on core mission activities. The Department recognizes Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a significant concern to sportsmen and wildlife managers. The Department is committed to working with State and Federal agencies, and other partners to facilitate consensus-based actions to address CWD.

Question. The Fish and Wildlife Service has stopped all international law enforcement activity that combats wildlife trafficking and poaching. What analysis did the Fish and Wildlife Service do before deciding to abandon all monitoring and prevention of zoonotic disease spillover caused by illegal wildlife trafficking and poaching?

Answer. The FWS has not stopped law enforcement activity that protects wildlife and plan resources in accordance with the laws of the United States and international treaties. The FWS continues to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which addresses issues related to the illegal trade of wildlife and plants within the CITES framework, and to participate in various CITES committees and working groups. At U.S. borders and points of entry, the FWS’s Office of Law Enforcement (OLE)’s wildlife inspectors and K9 teams actively monitor and interdict illegal wildlife trade and zoonotic pathogens shipments, including those in transit. FWS wildlife inspectors ensure that shipments comply with Federal laws related to humane transport and conduct proactive enforcement operations with FWS special agents and interagency partners. OLE special agents and attaches continue to play a pivotal role in enforc-

ing Federal wildlife statutes, protecting native species from exploitation, and training law enforcement officials at various levels, all while working to prevent zoonotic disease spillover from the illegal wildlife trade.

Question. The Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge contributes \$17 million to the local economy and welcomed over 300,000 visitors in a year—in large part due to the Festival of the Cranes. And every fall, the Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge hosts the Dragonfly festival. Yet, neither of them has enough staff to operate the refuges, let alone host the festival, which brings visitors from all over the world. These refuges are crucial for habitat, wildlife, and local economies.

Please provide a list of all terminated Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge System positions and locations, and a list of all remaining Refuge System positions and locations.

Answer. The Administration's goal is to make the Federal Government more efficient and accountable. As I have previously noted, Department employees have not been terminated. Employees who have elected to participate in the Deferred Resignation/Retirement Program or Voluntary Early Retirement Authority have done so voluntarily. The Department looks forward to continuing to meet our mission while implementing workforce efficiency strategies.

Question. Will you commit to working with my office to ensure that these refuges are appropriately funded and staffed to benefit local economies, promote tourism, and create jobs?

Answer. The Department is committed to ensuring the National Wildlife Refuge System is appropriately funded and staffed to carry out its core mission. We would be happy to work with you to that end.

QUESTION SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TAMMY BALDWIN

Question. The Rights Protection Implementation (RPI) line item in the Interior and Environment Appropriations bill helps fulfill Federal treaty, trust, and contract obligations to Tribes. In the Great Lakes region, the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission implements comprehensive conservation, natural resource protection, and law enforcement programs.

The Continuing Resolution did not allow the RPI line item to keep up with inflation and cost-of living increases. Shortfalls in funding have impacted the commission's conservation law enforcement division, which has led to a 45% warden vacancy rate within the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission and has made it impossible to compete with State and Federal counterparts.

Will your budget include funding for the Rights Protection Implementation to cover the current cost of full implementation?

Answer. While future funding levels remain to be determined, it is notable that the Rights Protection Implementation line item has increased in funding by 22.2% (+\$8.9M) during the most recent 5-year timeframe from FY 2019 through FY 2024.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND

Question. Mr. Secretary, 2 months ago Congress passed and President Trump signed into law the continuing resolution for fiscal year 2025. That bill included important funding for State and Tribal historic preservation offices (SHPOs and THPOs) through the Historic Preservation Fund. This funding enables these offices to fulfill their federally mandated duties, including supporting the listing of sites on the National Register, facilitating Historic Tax Credit projects and helping Federal agencies meet their obligations under the National Historic Preservation Act.

However, the Department has yet to release a notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) for State and Tribal historic preservation offices to apply for these funds. For SHPOs, this situation has become dire: with many States' fiscal years ending in June, some State offices already have had to lay staff off. Important preservation projects are being delayed. As a result, States and Tribes face the possibility of losing parts of their history.

I understand that the NOFO is currently awaiting approval at OMB and OPM. What steps will you take to make sure that the NOFO is approved immediately so that State and Tribal preservation offices can continue performing their critical—and federally required—work to preserve and protect our heritage? And can you commit to a date when our Nation's SHPOs and THPOs will see this year's NOFO?

Answer. As I mentioned in my hearing with the Appropriations Committees, we are in regular communication with OMB on executing the funding provided in the FY 2025 appropriations act.

Question. As you are aware, 2026 will be the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution and our Nation's founding. This event, the semiquincentennial, is a momentous occasion to celebrate our Nation's founding and the historic sites-like those in New York-that memorialize those events.

For the last several years in preparation for this event, this subcommittee has appropriated funding within the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund specifically set aside for grants to sites associated with the Nation's 250th anniversary. The Semiquincentennial Grant Program has funded important preservation projects in New York like rehabilitation of Old Fort Niagara and restoration of the original meeting house of the New York Senate. The administration's "skinny" budget would essentially gut the Historic Preservation Fund, and if enacted presumably take with it this vital program.

What do you envision as the Department of the Interior and National Park Service's role in facilitating the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the Nation's founding? How does the Historic Preservation Fund-as the Nation's main source investment in preservation of historic places-figure into that vision?

Answer. As the proud steward of America's treasured historical places, the National Park Service joins the Nation in celebrating the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026. From Independence Hall in Philadelphia to the Statue of Liberty in New York, at Revolutionary War battlefields from Lexington and Concord to Yorktown, and at monuments and memorials honoring our Nation's founders, national parks across the country will serve the American people by embracing our mission to provide opportunities for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

As you noted, the Semiquincentennial grant program was created by Congress in 2020 to support the preservation of sites and structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places that commemorate the founding of the Nation. Appropriated funds support the physical preservation of a broad variety of cultural resources associated with the country's 250th anniversary. To date, \$27 million has been awarded for 56 projects in 18 States, with another \$7 million in awards to be distributed this year.

The legislation establishing the America250 Commission emphasizes engagement in four cities with a significant NPS presence. The NPS is planning programs and events in these cities. A Community Volunteer Ambassador in each city will work with parks and communities to enrich efforts to educate and inspire. The NPS is also supporting and planning activities on the National Mall and in the Washington, D.C. area and at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Many of the Signature Cities are also host sites for the World Cup, including places like Liberty State Park in New York City, adjacent to the Statue of Liberty.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We all want to get fire right because we are all impacted.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator MURKOWSKI. With that, the committee stands adjourned. And thank you, Mr. Secretary.

[Whereupon, at 12:34 p.m., Wednesday, May 21, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATION FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:32 a.m. in Room SD-124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Lisa Murkowski (chairwoman) presiding.

Present: Senators Murkowski, Hoeven, Rounds, Merkley, Murray, Van Hollen, and Heinrich.

UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE

STATEMENT OF MR. TOM SCHULTZ, CHIEF, U.S. FOREST SERVICE

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good morning. We call to order this meeting of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies.

Chief, it is good to have you here before the committee today to discuss the President's fiscal year 2026 Budget Request for the United States Forest Service. We appreciate you joining us. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to visit with you earlier about, not only the important work that the Forest Service does around the country, but what it means to us in Alaska.

But it is a clearly an important role when we think about supporting our nation's timber and mineral industry, providing recreational opportunities to tens of millions of Americans, generating billions of dollars in economic output. So again, thank you for the chance to talk to you about many of these things, everything from wildfire, to timber, to recreation, workforce. It was good. It was a good conversation.

The President's budget request proposes a drastic reorganization of our nation's wildfire capabilities. It transfers the bulk of the wildfire personnel and activities from the Forest Service to a newly created U.S. Wildland Fire Service located within the Department of Interior.

So this subcommittee has always, always paid a great deal of attention to wildfire preparedness and suppression, we do it on a very bipartisan basis. This is one of those things that we all come to the table to talk about. And yet our forests continue to struggle. The costs keep escalating. And so I agree the problem calls out for

new ideas, for greater efficiency, but I am concerned about the proposal that we have because it upends your agency and its relationship to fire and forest management.

And for all I know, it may be a good thing. This may be exactly the right approach, but I would like to hear from you today about how the administration envisions this whole restructuring working, and really what it means to the Forest Service as an agency.

At the same time that we are having this hearing, Secretary Burgum, Secretary of the Interior, is over at the Energy Committee in a Full Committee Hearing, and these are the same kinds of questions that he is getting. So I am going to have a chance—I think both of us are going to be popping in and out of various committees here this morning, but that is one of the things that I want to ask the Secretary about.

The President has also set out an ambitious agenda on natural resources development, including focusing on increased timber production and mineral development from our nation's forests. Now, I am supportive of the endeavor. We want to be a partner in achieving many of these goals, but it is not you and I that are going to make that happen. It is going to be workforce capacity, and that is something that I continue to have concerns about.

Turning to Alaska and resource development, I want to thank President Trump and you for recognizing Alaska's amazing natural resource potential. We have got our Alaska-Specific Executive Order. There are other EOs nationally that we can benefit from, including the one on timber.

You know we have had this conversation, Alaska hosts two national forests, they just happen to be the largest in our country, and yet, the Chugach doesn't even have an allowable sale quantity for timber. The Tongass's is so dismal it probably ranks last in the nation. So whatever we can do to bolster our nation's timber production would be important to my home state.

We have also got major mineral potential, but without some level of flexibility within the Roadless Rule, it is almost impossible to realize that. So we fight this view or this perspective that some have, that our state is just some giant national park, some wilderness area that needs to be viewed from afar and not to be touched. So we want to work with you on some of these things.

The Forest Service National Forest System also plays a very key role in recreation and tourism, of course. Record visitation levels to our public lands, we want to encourage that, but it is imperative that we not discount the economic impacts that this can have on the economies of our local rural communities. I think it is critical that the Forest Service assets, like trails and public-use cabins, visitors' center, have the staffing that they need to do right by these public facilities.

We have really got to have a better understanding of the role that the Tongass plays in all of this. Forest Service really holds the key to the entire region's economy, as I shared with you, this is in part of the state where I was born, I spent my early years, right up until high school living in this southeastern area. It is all—every community is in the Tongass National Forest. We are surrounded by our national forest. I was born in the Tongass National Forest. Just 1 percent of this part of the state is in private hands.

National forest, and everything from local tour guide permits, subsistence activities, issuance of and maintaining of utility right-of-ways, economic development, these are all contingent on us having a Federal partner who is willing to work with the people and the industries who live and work in the region.

A failure by the Service to maintain routine business operations, whether through inadequate staffing or budget, I think is an abdication of responsibility. And it doesn't do anything except punish the communities and the citizens who live in or near our national forests, and restrict their economic opportunities.

I have shared the story with you of Mendenhall Glacier. This is managed by our National Forest Service. It is one of our most popular tourist attractions in Southeast Alaska, receiving over a million visitors in 2023 and more than 25,000 visitors daily during the summer period. This is so critical to the City and Borough of Juneau. We have got a great working relationship with the Tlingit & Haida Tribes, they are there at Mendenhall with a co-stewardship agreement with the Forest Service. That is really important.

I was there just a few weeks ago out at the visitors center and talked with one of your great Forest Service employees, and I have to tell you the morale is shot. People are trying to figure it out, and they are doing good work, and they are proud of the work that they are doing, but it is hard on them right now.

I am also concerned about other aspects of the budget proposal, the proposed elimination of the State, Private, and Local Forestry as well as Forest Rangeland Research accounts. I get the fact that we have got to make some hard budgetary decisions as we are dealing with deficits, but I think that there are many members of this committee who feel strongly about some of the programs within those accounts. I for one don't understand the cuts to State and Volunteer Fire Capacity grants.

This helps bolster the fire response in so many rural areas of the country. I think oftentimes the beneficiaries of these funds are the initial responders to fires that occur on Federal lands. So it seems to me that cuts like this actually run counter to the committee's continued push to increase our wildfire resilience and response.

I am also concerned the budget proposes to reduce the Service's capacity to work cooperatively with states, tribes, and local governments on the issue of invasive species. And that is something again we talk a lot about on a bipartisan basis here, because invasive species don't recognize property boundaries. They don't care whether you are a red state or a blue state. We are seeing the threat of these invasive insects and pests threaten the health of our Nation's forests and grasslands.

I think the Forest Service has been a great partner to many of the states and our local communities that face these threats, and the elimination of these programs in the Forest Service proposed budget has left the same states and communities struggling to understand how they are going to be able to do this alone.

I don't want to just be all about complaining. I am noting the challenges that we have within the budget. I know you know it. And that is why I am pleased that you are here with the Forest Service. I am looking forward to just kind of having a shift in attitude about what is going on in Alaska. I want people back home

to view the Forest Service as a willing partner, a partner with us in so many of these endeavors that are so important to our extraordinary public lands.

I look forward to your comments here this morning, and again your continued partnership.

And with that, I turn to my colleague from Oregon, the Ranking Member Senator Merkley.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Senator MERKLEY. Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Chief Schultz. The Forest Service manages a lot of land, 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands, and we certainly have a lot of those forests in my home state. People say: Well, how did you get so many forests? Well, this is where God planted the trees, in my state of Oregon. And so we grow up hiking, camping, being in the forest every second we can, and so they are very near and dear to our heart.

You have a responsibility to work with states and stakeholders to lead the research and develop the tools that improve the health of trees from the backcountry to the urban landscape, and to meet the challenges of invasive pests and new diseases, urban heat domes, and wildfires. Many of these challenges, they don't respect state boundaries; sudden oak death, bark beetles, wildfires, they are not local problems, they are national, and we need a national strategy.

Now, the Chief of the Forest Service, it is an appointed position, not a nomination, so it is not confirmed by the Senate, and is typically filled by a person who has served in the Forest Service and who understands the motto of the Forest Service, Caring for the Land and Serving the People, which I believe you do.

However, this administration is making it exceedingly difficult to achieve these worthy goals. There are folks in this administration who want the American people to believe that public lands are mismanaged, to cut personnel and funding so they will be mismanaged, and to sell them off to the highest bidder. That is hardly caring for the land and serving the people. That is more like serving the powerful and selling off the lands. That is certainly not the motto of the Forest Service.

So here we have a budget that proposes to decimate a dedicated workforce, to slash established environmental standards, protect profits of oil and gas companies instead of protecting habitats and watersheds. This budget cancels funds to develop techniques to neutralize invasive species that threaten our forests. Cancels funds to help Federal officials, states, and private landowners partner together across a patchwork of jurisdictions to improve forest health. Cancels funds for removing decades-old unused logging roads that harm salmon runs, degrade watersheds, and cause landslides. Cancels funds for supporting collaboration between environmentalists and timber companies to ensure that logging and fuels projects meet all of a communities' needs.

These are just a few of the many program cancellations and deep cuts in this budget. And I am certainly alarmed by the cuts to the wildfire programs. The administration has already frozen funds and threatened to impound funds for wildfire fuels reduction and

Community Wildfire Defense Grants and this administration terminated probationary employees who held red cards, meaning that they had firefighting expertise.

This administration forced voluntary separation on senior wildland fire staff, only to recognize they needed to scramble to hire some of them back with financial incentives just in time for fire season.

I was briefed by Federal, state, and local officials on the upcoming wildfire season in Oregon, on May 30th, and the basic bottom line: this year is going to be hotter, and it is going to be drier than last year, if the forecast is right. Last year we had a record number of acres burn in my state. Those acres, the bad fires, came earlier. We were fortunate, therefore, because we had folks come from other states to help us out, and then later in the season we were able to send folks to help out in other states.

But what happens if those fires are all happening all at once? And what happens if that longer, hotter, drier summer produces more fires than last year? Instead of investing more in wildfire prevention and firefighting, this budget slashes those investments. No funds for research on climate chaos to understand how to reduce wildfire risk. No funds to help volunteers in rural fire departments with training and equipment.

Instead of slashing these programs, we should be investing, investing in good science, investing in good neighbor cooperation, investing in good management of our forests and watersheds. To reach these goals, one of the most effective programs we have is the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. It brings together public officials, environmental advocates, timber industry, and local stakeholders to encourage effective forest management that reduces wildfire risk while delivering sawlogs to the mill.

Now, this particular program is an example of solving a problem. One problem was very hard to get stakeholders who had opposing views into the room to work together. And another problem is that timber sales were all ending up in the courts.

Well, this program has brought people together across the stakeholder community to work together, to work out what they refer to as prescriptions for the forest. The result has been more forest health and more sawlogs to the mill. It has been a win-win. And your budget kills the program. A major solution to two significant problems, and your budget kills the program.

It is bipartisan. Senator Risch, Senator Daines, Senator Crapo, all Republicans, Idaho and Montana. Senator Wyden, myself, Senator Bennet, Colorado and Oregon. Bipartisan, "Blue" and "Red" working together to solve these problems, and your budget kills the program.

That is disturbing, to say the least. What would we do if this budget actually became law. If we just implemented it the way it is, it would be massive damage to our forests. We have to do better. We have to continue important research, we have to continue meaningful collaboration with states and stakeholders. We have to have real investment in forest management. We have to have the right staff, the experienced staff who know what they are doing to deliver the right results.

And everything I have done in life said: My success will be much better if I have a good team. When you fire the good team, as you have done with so many employees, you really head in the wrong direction.

And the administration undermines the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the hallmark promise we made to future generations to save natural places. This budget seems designed not to augment the work of the Forest Service and its motto, but to undermine the work of the Forest Service.

Let us get back to the vision of caring for the land and serving the people.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Merkley, thank you.

And we will now turn to Chief Schultz. Again, welcome to the committee. Please provide us your thoughts for the next five minutes. Know that your full written statement will be incorporated as part of the record.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF HON. TOM SCHULTZ

Mr. SCHULTZ. Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

Established in 1905, the Forest Service is the Nation's foremost Federal forestry organization. The Forest Service manages 154 national forests, 20 national grasslands covering 193 million acres in 43 states and Puerto Rico. The Forest Service also works with communities, state, local, and tribal governments, forest industries, and private forest landowners, managing for multiple uses.

Big picture, America's forests provide timber, clean air and water, forage, and energy production. They support local economies through employment, trade, recreation, tourism, jobs, and livestock grazing. Alongside our partners, the Forest Service will continue to conserve and sustainably manage the nation's forests and grasslands.

Recent analysis shows that in fiscal year 2023, the Forest Service programs contributed approximately 390,000 jobs and \$45 billion in GDP. This includes recreational visitor use, hunting, fishing, energy and minerals development, forest products, and livestock grazing.

I am grateful to serve as the 21st Chief of the Forest Service. I recognize that I am the first chief who did not come from or work previously within the Agency, but I hope you will see, as I do, that that is a strength; I have more than 27 years of land management experience, and I am a lifelong user of public lands.

Working for state agencies in Montana and Idaho has given me a perspective on the role of the states in managing public trust lands and how that differs from goals and objectives in managing Federal lands. My experience in the private sector at Idaho Forest Group gave me a deep understanding of markets and the role that raw material availability, quality, and price play in being able to support a profitable forest products industry.

The fiscal year 2026 President's Budget refocuses Forest Service efforts on active forest management, critical minerals permitting, recreation, and energy development. In addition, the budget re-

quest emphasizes efficient and effective fire management by consolidating the Federal suppression response apparatus into the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service under the Department of Interior.

The Forest Service was founded on and understands the utility of our national forests. The production of timber, lumber, paper, bioenergy, and other wood products is vital for our country's well-being. The President's executive order on the expansion of timber production emphasizes the importance of timber production and how forest management can support American lives and communities.

The fiscal year 2026 Budget Request supports this executive order by maintaining our ability to support the forest products industry and shifting the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program to the National Forest System. This shift will better align the practical data needs for both public and private forest management.

Our public lands offer some of the best recreational opportunities in the world, and many are on Forest Service lands. Recreational access is a cornerstone of our public lands, and I want to increase opportunities for people and communities to benefit from them.

However, the Federal Government and the Forest Service cannot support this alone. We need additional support from partners and our communities to fund this ever-increasing use of public lands. This is an all-hands opportunity that must be supported to ensure continued availabilities of lands. We have 82,000 volunteers that support the Forest Service in clearing trails and maintaining recreation sites.

Livestock grazing on Federal lands is integral to ranchers across the United States, especially in the West. Grazing is permitted on nearly 40 percent of the 193 million acres of National Forest System lands across 27 states. We administer permits for approximately 5,500 permittees, with 1.3 million acres authorized for cattle, and 800,000 AUMs for sheep.

Access to critical minerals is essential to contribute to a stable supply of energy for current and future generations, while continuing to sustain long-term ecosystem health and productivity. National forests are a bountiful resource for minerals, and work hard along with the BLM, to manage leasable minerals from the National Forest System.

We carry a fiduciary responsibility to the American public. We must steward tax dollars wisely, so we are examining how to best optimize our workforce and our expenditures to ensure that we are focused on field-based operations that are essential for meeting our high-priority objectives.

To this point, the 2026 Budget Request reduces or eliminates some aspects of the Federal funding from the Forest Service budget to ensure stewardship of American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and State governments. It is not our intention to degrade the services of states and local governments, but we must change the reliance on the Federal Government to fund or deliver these services.

In alignment with restoring Federalism, we encourage increasing state authority to fund management of state and privately owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities. Communities across the country depend on national forests

and grasslands, and I will work tirelessly to support those communities by partnering to actively manage the National Forest System for multiple uses.

We maintain our commitment to strengthening relationships with the industries, the ranching families, the mining industry, communities, and conservation groups to deliver on our multiple-use mission as we have for the last 100 years.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today, and thank you for your ongoing support. I will be glad to answer your questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. TOM SCHULTZ

Chair Murkowski, Ranking Merkley, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's FY 2026 Budget request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2026 President's Budget for the USDA Forest Service requests \$2.1 billion in discretionary appropriations for base programs. The 2026 Forest Service Budget is focused and strategic, making trade-offs for efficiency and alignment around the highest priorities for National Forest System lands. The Budget proposes the elimination of multiple programs and significant funding reductions in programs that remain, with the objective of better allocating Federal resources and addressing the Federal deficit and debt while delivering on our core mission to sustain the health and productivity of our Nation's forests and grasslands. These critical changes will put the agency on a sustainable path while ensuring our National Forests and Grasslands provide the goods and services expected by the American people.

The FY 2026 budget request focuses on crucial investments that will help the Forest Service conserve and manage national forests and grasslands sustainably. It will also support local economies through jobs, trade, timber production, recreation access, energy development, and livestock grazing.

The production of various forest products, such as timber, lumber, paper, bio-energy, and other wood products (timber production) is vital for the country's well-being. Executive Order 14225, Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production, emphasizes the importance of timber production and how forest management and wildfire risk reduction projects can protect American lives and communities. The FY 2026 budget request supports Executive Order 14225 by sustaining the forest products program at FY 2025 levels.

To ensure domestic production of critical minerals and to contribute to a stable supply of energy for current and future generations while continuing to sustain long-term ecosystem health and productivity, the Forest Service works together with the DOI's Bureau of Land Management to manage leasable minerals on National Forest System lands. The FY 2026 budget continues to support the Forest Service Minerals and Geology Management program.

Livestock grazing on Federal lands is crucial for ranchers across the United States, especially in the West. This practice has been part of land management for generations, providing food for the American public, and preserving working landscapes, conserving natural resources, and the communities that depend on them. The FY 2026 budget ensures that livestock grazing continues to meet many of the Forest Service's multiple-use objectives.

To improve efficiency and Federal response, the FY 2026 budget removes duplicate efforts in Federal Wildland Fire Management by consolidating the Federal suppression response apparatus into a new DOI bureau. The new U.S. Wildland Fire Service will unify logistical and support functions such as dispatching, training, information technology, reporting, financial management, and contracting. This organization will provide initial attack, large fire response, and facilitate hazardous fuels mitigation operations (both mechanical and prescribed fire) for all Federal land management agencies enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal wild-fire response capacity.

THE PRESIDENT'S FY 2026 BUDGET REQUEST FOR SPECIFIC PRIORITIES

The following investments align with and enhance the agency's efforts to modernize the wildland fire management system:

- Forest Service Operations: Requested amount reduces support services salaries and facility leases to streamline Agency's management structure and right size

the real property footprint. Some funding and associated capacity will shift to the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service in DOI to meet business support requirements associated with the combined fire organization.

- Forest and Rangeland Research: The account was eliminated, except for Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) which was moved to the National Forest System account and the Joint Fire Science program which would be moved to the DOI as part of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The shift of the FIA program will ensure that it is aligned with the practical needs of forest management for timber production, continuing to sustain its longstanding census of forest resources and conditions to the National Forest System.
- State, Private, and Tribal Forestry: The discretionary account was eliminated to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and State governments. In alignment with restoring federalism, we encourage increasing State authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities.
- National Forest System: The 2026 Budget proposes \$1.297 billion to fund the National Forest System focusing support on field-based operations, which are essential for meeting high-priority agency objectives. With this level of funding the Forest Service will prioritize activities related to timber sales, recreation, environmental analyses, law enforcement, critical minerals permitting, and grazing allotment management. This prioritization will ensure public safety on National Forest System (NFS) lands, timber production and range management activities critical for rural economic development and restoration of NFS lands and increased domestic production of critical minerals to support national defense and electrification needs. The \$175 million previously within the NFS account for hazardous fuels mitigation will be requested by DOI in support of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service to perform and or facilitate mechanical and prescribed fire operations on NFS lands.
- Capital Improvement and Maintenance: The 2026 request necessitates a significant rightsizing of Forest Service facilities (both administrative and recreation), roads, and trails. Prioritization will be made in alignment with the Administration's priorities, with funding going towards infrastructure that facilitates timber production, hazardous fuels removal, mineral extraction, and emergency response.
- Wildland Fire Management: The 2026 request will transfer the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management appropriations to DOI for the creation of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. This new DOI bureau will absorb the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management response program, including over 11,000 firefighters, 3,000 operational fire support personnel and leadership, and over 400 business support personnel.

Through Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (Public Law 116–152) funding, the Forest Service continues to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the National forests and grasslands through the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and the FY 2026 budget requests its reauthorization for another 5 years.

The GAOA also permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), with which the Forest Service invests in conservation and recreation opportunities in public and private lands through the Forest Legacy Program and Federal Land Acquisition. The FY 2026 request proposes an amendment to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act expanding it to include a new Priority Deferred Maintenance program to address priority deferred maintenance projects at DOI bureaus and the Forest Service. For the Forest Service, this LWCF Priority Deferred Maintenance program will prioritize deferred maintenance projects that support and facilitate high-priority objectives associated with timber production, emergency response, and recreation activities. The funding would be spent predominantly on roads, bridges, and facilities, including those critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety.

In closing, the President's FY 2026 Budget request proposes a landmark restructuring in Federal wildland fire to ensure an efficient and effective combined response apparatus managed by the DOI for all Federal lands. The FY 2026 Budget request underscores our commitment to focusing on investments that prioritize the products from and access to the American public wants from their national forests. We are getting back to the basics of managing our National forests for their intended purposes of producing timber, clean water, recreation, and other necessities for the American taxpayers.

We look forward to working with this subcommittee to fulfill the President's economic goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands, and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Chief. Let me begin. You have noted that you are the first chief who hasn't kind of come up through the ranks, but I would agree with you, your observation that there can be great value with that. I think you have an awareness of what some may describe as a finicky relationship between the Forest Service and many of the states.

In some areas of the country Forest Service is a great partner. Others, they are viewed as this absentee landlord that is just kind of a pain. You have taken it upon yourself to visit many of our national forests, to meet the people, to look at the forests themselves, but to really gain a better understanding of the state, of the agency that you are charged with leading right now.

So I mentioned in my opening that some of the folks that I am coming in contact with are concerned. They are telling me morale is down. They are worried about how they are going to be able to provide for that—not only continued public service when it is something like the Mendenhall Visitors Center, or just making sure that we have trails that are maintained so that that visitor experience is there.

Or as I am talking with folks in the timber industry saying, you know: Are we really going to see anything different coming forward with this administration? So this is a pretty broad question, but can you give me your sense as to how the Forest Service is viewed overall right now, and if there are any common themes that you are picking up on that you are saying: All right, this has got to be my job number one coming into this position?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Thank you, Madam Chair. So job number one for me is to lead the Agency. There are a lot of competing objectives, a lot of demands from the public, whether it is timber, whether it is minerals, whether it is recreation—

Senator MURKOWSKI. That is because we are multiple-use.

Mr. SCHULTZ. That is right.

Senator MURKOWSKI. If it was just timber, it would be an easy job, but it is not.

Mr. SCHULTZ. That is right. Absolutely. My job in leading the Agency, though, is to be connected with both the Agency and the decision-makers, right, so that is where I have focused. And I have been out to Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8. So I have been in this role about 13 weeks, and I have been out—every other week, I go out to the field to visit with people.

So your question about morale, it varies. And what I find is that in many cases, the more information people have, the better they feel. So there has been an increase in information flow from myself and others, and as we have provided additional information, we have seen morale has increased. But it is not perfect, I mean, for sure, it is not. We have patches where I think the more information people have, the better they feel.

And I can tell you, on the districts that I have visited, where we have employee engagements, typically the feedback post those engagements is positive. But I have not been—we have, you know,

154 forests, and I have probably been on, in the last 3 months, maybe I have been on 14, or you know, 12 to 14 forests.

So it is a slow process to get out and meet with people. But I can tell you, the more those engagements that are direct and I can share my thoughts and ideas with people, that things are improving, and people see there is some hope in terms of what the future looks like. I think some people are excited in terms of where we can go and how we can better deliver service to the public, and how we can align and do things differently. I mean, that is a big focus right now.

A lot of the reductions that have been discussed in the Forest Service and how we are looking to restructure, and this was initiated, you know, over a year ago. And that was initiated because of some of the hole that we had in our budget. We had about a \$750 million hole based on some decisions that were made on hiring. We hired a bunch of permanent employees with one-time money. So the Forest Service has known for quite some time that there was some reckoning that was coming in terms of a restructuring effort.

So regardless of broader issues across government, the Forest Service has a necessity to restructure the Agency to better align with the budgets that we do have, even current budgets, let alone the 2026 budget.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So let me, let me ask on that. And you have given me your commitment in private, but I am just going to ask you to reaffirm it here. You have said you have been out to multiple regions, we need your commitment that you are going to be coming North to visit both of Alaska's key national forests?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, ma'am, this summer.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Very good. We will welcome you there. And so then when you are talking about budgets and realignments, and you know, I have mentioned some of the reductions in force, and what we have seen, we have got a very strong executive order that I referenced in my opening comments, to be told by an administration that they want to unleash one state's resource opportunity, we are excited about that, but we also understand that again, in order to do so, it requires people to execute that.

So can you give me the assurance that what we are seeing with the workforce reduction initiatives that are underway in the Forest Service are not going to delay, or impede, or obstruct the implementation of the President's executive order?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Madam Chair, what I can tell you is I can't guarantee there won't ever be any impacts, but I can tell you if we do have impacts, we will correct those as we learn information. We have a focus on maintaining all of our rec sites and our administrative sites, keeping them open to the public. It may not be 100 percent of the time if we have some reduced hours, but we are currently laddering people around the Agency to make sure we fill critical vacancies.

So to your point, we have had some people in the field at a district, at a forest level leave, and we have identified those critical vacancies to fill. We are actually moving people around to fill those critical positions. So where we do have impacts, which there are

impacts when people leave, we are trying to fill those as quickly as we can. So we are doing that in an ongoing basis right now.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, and I appreciate that, but I also recognize that all employees within the Forest Service are not necessarily fungible. In other words, if you are losing an individual in the Mendenhall area who is trained in dealing with bear avoidance with the public that is coming in off of the buses, and I take somebody from a headquarter in, I don't know, I am making up a town, Indianapolis, and put them out there, I don't want that situation.

And I am hoping that, again, we are looking at this and recognizing that it is not just moving bodies, but it is ensuring that we have that level of expertise.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me turn to Senator Heinrich.

Senator HEINRICH. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And I am glad to hear, Chief, that you are going to be visiting several forests in Alaska this summer. I want to ask a similar question but start from the point of view of, you know, the Santa Fe National Forest manages the vast majority of the headwaters of the Pecos Watershed, which is one of the most important watersheds in the State of New Mexico.

And for decades, this is a community that has really worked very hard with very few resources to try to recover from historic pollution and protect that resource from future pollution. This is a river that supports traditional farming, recreation, fishing, fisheries, and many other—many other uses that are economically critical to that community. But we still have legacy pollution from a pretty disastrous mine spill some 30 years ago. And I know I communicated with you recently. I sent you a letter inviting you to visit this community, and meet with my constituents. Is that something that you can commit to doing?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for the question. So my staff is looking at that request, and we are trying to figure out if we can make that work. That is something we are actively working on right now.

Senator HEINRICH. I hope you can make that a priority. I think it is really helpful to get that community perspective. And you know, there are, there are vast differences between communities that call our national forest home, gateway communities in our different states. And so I would very much welcome you to join us in New Mexico for that. And I will make any logistics that you need help with a priority.

I am all for making government more efficient, but one of the things I am concerned about is that there are some things that DOGE seems to be making less efficient. And one of those has been contract approvals and that seems to be having real consequences in the Service, trash piling up at recreation sites, bathroom challenges, equipment not getting replaced in a timely way.

I sent you and Secretary Rollins a letter on this yesterday, but can you give me a sense, why is it taking so long to get simple things, like a contract extension for custodial services authorized?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So Madam Chair, and Senator Heinrich, so what I will tell you is initially when we first started looking at some of the existing contracts that we had for prior obligations, there was

a process we had to get in place. And I think we have worked through all of the existing obligations. There shouldn't be anything that is hung up there. When it comes to new obligations, we as the Forest Service instituted our own policies and procedures in addition to review from the Department and from the efficiency folks.

So we have put a process in place to make sure that it is thorough and responsive. When it comes to certain things like toilets and cleaning up toilets, which has been a huge issue that I have weighed in on in numerous cases, we have figured out that process, and some of that is on the Forest Service for the process that we put in place has kind of slowed some things down. But it is something that we have addressed, and there should not be toilets that are not being cleaned at this point in time. So if you are hearing about that, please let me know because we have really jumped on this issue.

And in contracting in general, I think there is a review in place for contracts, grants, and agreements; it is not just contracts, it is all three of those. And that is something we are looking at how we make that process more efficient. But there is a very thorough review. You are, you are absolutely right.

And is it different than it has been historically? Yes, it is, because there is more attention to detail in those contracts. But we are looking to make that process more effective and more timely than it has been over the last month. But it is something that we have a new process we just instituted about a month ago, and we are working on making that better.

Senator HEINRICH. I understand the need for analysis and review. I just want to make sure that we are not, you know, adding layers of bureaucracy in the name of efficiency.

The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes in New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona these are institutes that offer unique opportunities for dedicated research in forest science and watershed health. They represent the future of science for our forest management. Yet, this plan cuts the Institute's budget by more than 50 percent, and that is just not a number that they can swallow in a single year. Why did you decide to reduce the funding for the institutes this year, and what is your plan for them in fiscal year 2026?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Okay. So I think, first of all, the fiscal year 2025 Budget is what your question is, I think, on the first one. So we did cut \$3 million for fiscal year 2025. So for the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) budget, they currently have \$23 million on hand in prior appropriation dollars. So that was part of the consideration.

So we are trying to align the 2025 Budget as we move toward the 2026 President's Budget. So we are moving in that direction. So the why is, we are trying to align this year's 2025 Budget with where we are going in 2026. In 2026, it does not include resources to provide funding for SWERI, so there are resources this year, they are reduced, but next year in the 2026 Budget there are none. That is correct. And that is tied to R&D's overall look?

And the reason that R&D is treated differently in the 2026 budget, there is going to be a greater reliance on the states and the universities. So a lot of the land grant universities, and as a member of the Advisory Board at the university.

Senator HEINRICH. That institute is at Highlands University?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir, I understand. Yes, sir. My point is, though, that the funding in the future is going to have to come more from those universities themselves and other grant opportunities. The Forest Service is going to be shifting its funding away from R&D, in general, in the budget.

Senator HEINRICH. I think that is a mistake. And I think these institutes have really provided the Forest Service an enormous amount of science at a time when management has needed to change because conditions have been changing. And so I hope that as we approach the appropriations process that we consider this President's budget as it should be considered, advisory.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Heinrich.

Senator Rounds.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief Schultz, it is good to see you here today. In recent years, timber sales in the Black Hills National Forest have steadily declined, placing significant strain on timber product manufacturers. The U.S. Forest Service has been unable to justify these harvesting shortfalls in the Black Hills, and as a result, local timber businesses have been forced to absorb additional shipping costs to source timber from more distant locations.

To address this issue, I have introduced the Timber Harvesting Restoration Act, which would require superintendents of National Forest System units to submit harvesting improvement reports to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture if they have consistently fallen well below the annual allowable sale quantity outlined in their forest plans. Sawmills in the Black Hills have borne the brunt of these shortfalls. In response to the reduced timber supply, some producers have been forced to scale back operations or close sawmills altogether.

My question today, sir, is I have been encouraged by the administration's plans to increase the speed and scale of timber production on federally managed lands. Can you highlight any specific actions or plans the Forest Service has to improve the situation in the Black Hills National Forest?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Thank you, Senator. Yes, so this has been a high priority. I have been familiar with the Black Hills issues for years. And I have actually been involved with shutting down a sawmill that was tied to lack of available solid timber, so I understand the issues firsthand.

In particular, at the Black Hills, there was a meeting probably six weeks ago with industry, with conservation entities, with the Forest Service to develop a plan, a short-term plan and a long-term plan. And my understanding is that within the next two weeks that short-term plan should be coming forward that will lay out a strategy for the next 12 months, what that plan is going to look like. And then beyond that, there is a longer-term plan being developed looking at the opportunity for stewardship contracts, Good Neighbor Agreement contracts.

We have also detailed a person from a forest in Region 6 to the Black Hills to assist, that has been very effective, and assist the timber staff there. So it is something that is front and center for

us. I am familiar with the issues. I know the industry players as well as the entities that are working to help us.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you for that. Let me talk about accountability a little bit. Are you planning on, in your new plan, to have accountability measures that the Forest Service would be able to use to review whether or not the regional staff are effectively following through on the timber harvesting improvement plans that would be put in place?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir, we are.

Senator ROUNDS. Okay. In response to the executive order titled, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production," the Forest Service has proposed a national timber strategy aimed at increasing domestic timber production by 25 percent over the next 5 years. Unfortunately, under the strategy, Region 2, which includes South Dakota, is projected to increase timber production by only 2 percent.

How are those regional percentages determined, and how will the strategy address the immediate need of the timber industry in the Black Hills, where timber availability put up for harvest by the Forest Service has declined drastically over the last 5 years, outside of what the Forest plan was in the first place?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, that initial analysis was based on having \$200 million available to allocate across the country, and what they did was they looked at from 2020 through 2024 in terms of outputs, so they used that as a guide to allocate \$200 million across the National Forest System. So they are trying to allocate funding where there is a greater likelihood of outputs.

So that is not a drawn-in-the-sand line. That is only—that is based on those additional dollars being brought to the table. So we have an existing program that already exists today. That \$200 million is in addition to our existing funding. So we are exploring other options. We are exploring options working with the State of Wyoming under a broader Good Neighbor Agreement, where they would actually manage some of the National Forest System lands in partnership with the Forest Service.

We are looking at a long-term stewardship agreement that could be administered and provide less cost to the Forest Service. So those numbers right there, that is additional outputs tied only to a preliminary thought on allocation of funds. It is not a constraint. It is saying that if we had this \$200 million and we allocate it like this, based on our current cost structure, that is what the additional output would look like, but that is not drawn in the sand.

Senator ROUNDS. Okay. Thank you. And one last question. Chief Schultz, concerned landowners in Western South Dakota have contacted my office regarding minor fence line disputes between producers and Federal officials. My understanding is that such disagreements are relatively common in areas with a high concentration of Forest Service land. I believe landowners deserve a fair notice and a review process when disputes with the Federal government arise. How do you plan to address these concerns and make sure that landowners are treated fairly in such cases?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I appreciate the question. So a couple things, one, when we are aware of specific issues, we will address those specific issues, but I have also reached out to some of the

trade associations that work with the ranching community to better understand what some of their priorities are, and we are working with them to understand how we can, from a policy perspective, approach things more from a communication across the country, and then when there are specific issues, we will deal with those on a case-by-case basis.

Senator ROUNDS. Okay. Not necessarily turning it into a criminal action?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator MERKLEY [presiding]. Well, thank you very much. We appreciate your questions, Senator Rounds.

My first question we submitted to you in advance so we could get a crisp answer because many people have been very concerned about the teams that we have ready to fight in the upcoming forest fire season. How many permanent firefighters do we have on board today, and how many seasonal firefighters do we have on board?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So in terms of—Senator, in terms of the firefighters we have hired to date, we have just under 11,000 that we have brought on board, and those are GS-9 and below, so that is our primary firefighting force. Our goal is to have about 11,300 at full capacity, so we are actually a little bit ahead of where we were last year at this time in terms of our overall hiring of our firefighting force.

Senator MERKLEY. It was pointed out to me back in Oregon that a lot of the folks who have signed up for the firefighter season are actually also accepting positions in other places because they are applying multiple places and getting multiple acceptances. Are we pretty confident that those 11,000 are going to show up?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, yes, we are confident.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay. And the other concern has been, not just the front line, but also the management teams, the complex incident management teams, how many teams do we believe we are going to be able to deploy, and how does that compare to a year ago?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So currently we have 37 teams nationally, and those are not all Forest Service teams. About 50 percent of the personnel on those teams are staffed by Forest Service personnel. There are also Department of Interior personnel. There are also states that also support those teams. So we have 37 today, and approximately a year ago we probably had closer to 42 teams.

Senator MERKLEY. And are you working to get to that 42 number?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir. I think that the team discussion is a broader discussion. There has been a decline in team participation for years. And I think part of it is just—a lot of people do that as an additional duty. It is not a primary responsibility. So I think there are opportunities to talk about, on an ongoing basis, how we better structure teams, and does that become a more permanent role, or do we continue to do it with volunteers; because right now team participation is largely based on volunteers.

Senator MERKLEY. What we had heard back home was that we lost a lot of folks who participated in these teams due to the firings

and the early retirements that were offered. And is that a piece of why we are at 37 instead of 42?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, so keep in mind, like, 50 percent of the personnel are just Forest Service. There are other personnel that are also contributing to this. I don't know the extent that that has had the impact, but what I can tell you is we have had about 1,400 people take DRP that had fire calls.

We recently reached out to ask them if they had an interest in coming back, and we just opened that up about a week ago. The Secretary has been very clear that she wants them to come back if they have an interest, and we are going to work through that process. So the numbers are still in flux. We will know more over the next week to two weeks.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. I am going to turn to a chart that I have had the team prepare, and this chart is really all about state, private, and tribal forestry grants. And the chart suggests a number of questions.

So what we are seeing here is that we had a continuing resolution for fiscal year 2025, but all of the items that are in red have been dramatically reduced in the numbers you submitted to us. They have been cut in half, and that amount of money, \$43.25 million, has been moved down to program salaries.

Now, these are formula grants by and large, with one exception. That is the landscape scale restoration. The rest are formula grants. They are very easy to distribute. Of these three that are formula that have not been reduced, have those funds been provided to the states?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, they are in the process of being provided to the states. I don't think they have been fully provided to the states yet.

Senator MERKLEY. So they have not been. And I can assure you, because we are hearing from all the states, saying: Hey, we need these grants, where are they in order to keep the rhythm of our programs alive? But can you commit to me today that those funds for those three programs, will go out?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir. Our intention is to have all three of those grants go out here shortly.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. And then the ones that are in red that have been cut in half, why have they been cut in half?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, so as you look at the 2026 budget, I alluded to this earlier with the SWERI discussion, we are moving toward a budget that does not have funding for those, we shifted that funding to salaries and expenses, we have the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP), we have to pay for the DRP cost. So when people leave, there is that accrued leave that has to be paid out, so those funds are being shifted to pay for the DRP cost.

Senator MERKLEY. Can you explain to the public what a DRP is?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So that is the Deferred Resignation Program. That is where people voluntarily leave the Agency and it is kind of like a severance package.

Senator MERKLEY. So the picture this is painting is \$43 million is being shifted, \$43.25 million is being shifted out of state grants, it is being shifted into program salaries because the plan, as you

have laid out for fiscal year 2026, is to shut down all of these programs?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay. I can tell you, vast disagreement with this strategy. First of all, I think it is a violation of the trust between Congress and the Forest Service, because Congress laid out a vision, a Continuing Resolution, and you are not continuing the programs. You are cutting them in half. And you are doing it and shifting funds saying: We know what is going to happen in fiscal year 2026, we are going to shut down these programs.

Well, the Executive Branch is about executing the programs, and I don't anticipate that Congress is going to shut down those programs. So isn't it kind of a betrayal of the relationship to be cutting programs in half in preparation for shutting them down completely, when the vision has not been laid out by Congress to do so?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think what we recognize is that, in terms of the specific language in our appropriation, there is some flexibility in how we do this, and we do know that we have a need to cover the cost of the DRP payments. So we can't go into a deficit spending model, and so we thought that was the most prudent way to go about doing this.

Senator MERKLEY. I am over my time, so I am going to defer to Senator Murray. But I will just note the idea of shifting from real work on the ground to paying personnel expenses and doing a lot less work on the ground is absolutely not in concert with the vision laid out by Congress in the bill.

Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Senator Merkley. And I agree with you 100 percent. Thank you for outlining that.

Let me go to this. As everyone knows, we are approaching wild-fire season. In my home State of Washington, wildfires are a constant threat, as you well know. And when we invest in fire prevention, we save lives, we save entire communities. One of the most important investments we make is in the people who do that work. But President Trump is throwing all of that work into jeopardy right now. He has pushed out nearly 7,500 skilled employees across the Forest Service, either by firing them outright or pressuring them to leave under threat of losing their job later down the line.

That includes at least 500 Forest Service employees in the Pacific Northwest. But we hardly know the full scope of the damage because the administration won't share critical information with us. I have spoken with countless Forest Service workers from Washington State who loved their job. They played an important role in fighting those fires and are gone now. Thanks to Trump.

Setting aside the proposal for a consolidated firefighting agency, this budget proposes a \$1.4 billion cut, that is 40 percent, to the Forest Service non-fire programs at a time when our nation's trees, from our backyards to the backcountry, are under stress, and we need to step up the pace of forest health and resiliency to withstand these catastrophic wildfires.

On top of all that, the Forest Service has illegally withheld Federal funds to help reduce wildfire risk and is currently not distributing \$97 million to support state, rural, and volunteer fire departments. That is a huge threat to our communities I represent in

Washington State, who have told me personally this administration is putting them in danger by gutting our ability to respond to wildfires.

So Chief Schultz, I do appreciate your service to our country. I realize you are not making all the decisions here, but I have a number of important questions today, and I hope you can provide this committee with the information that we do need.

Now, as I mentioned, I am profoundly concerned about this administration's reckless decision to mass fire and push out essential Forest Service employees across the country. The administration claimed that no firefighters have been fired, but the reality is, on the ground, we have lost workers whose jobs are absolutely essential. Nearly every single Forest Service worker supports fire operations in some capacity.

Trail maintenance crews, for instance, ensure access to routes remain clear for firefighting personnel and equipment. Biologists conduct essential environmental assessments that inform prescribed burns and fuel reduction strategies. Other support staff, ecologists, engineers, maintenance workers, camp managers receive firefighter training, and they are actually mobilized during peak fire season to bolster our frontline firefighting crews.

So Chief Schultz, was there any formal analysis conducted to determine the potential effect of the mass firings for wildfire preparedness?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Murray, thank you for the question. So I will try to just clarify a few things. So in terms of a mass firing, we didn't have a mass firing.

Senator MURRAY. I am talking about across the board, pushing people out, early retirement, doing all those things.

Mr. SCHULTZ. All right. I just want to clarify. So we did have two rounds of that Deferred Resignation Program, and that was about 4,200 people that left voluntarily. And then we had another—

Senator MURRAY. Because they didn't know what was coming, right?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right. They didn't know what was—I don't disagree with you. And we had another 600 that took voluntary early retirement. So there was no—in terms of there were incentives for people to leave, now, in terms of—we did not know who was going to leave, obviously, it was a voluntary process.

So what we have done is, when they did leave, we have been moving people to, you know, we called that lateral movement. And we have been doing that across the Agency, and we have moved probably close to 600 or 700 people to fill those critical vacancies.

When it comes to the fire piece specifically, we had, I think I mentioned earlier, about 1,400 people that had fire quals that did leave. And we have reached out to those folks to secure their services this fire season to see if they want to come back on a voluntary basis to function on their team—

Senator MURRAY. This just seems really ridiculous that it was done this way, which was my question, actually. Was there an analysis done before this was all done, to realize the impacts of these people that you are now trying to find and bring back?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, so we could not do the analysis because we didn't know who was going to leave because it was voluntary., right, we didn't go handpick the——

Senator MURRAY. Well, I want to get on, but I will just say the stakes are life and death here, and this really raises serious alarms about this Agency being ready for this critical fire season.

Now, let me move on. Interior Secretary Burgum recently told this committee that on-the-ground wildfire operations would not be affected by the administration's staffing cuts across various agents. But we know that is not true. In the Mount Baker—Snoqualmie National Forest, one firefighter barracks recently and abruptly lost power. And it stayed without power not for a few hours, or a day, but for weeks.

Why? Because the maintenance workers in that forest had been pushed out the door, there was no ability to put even a small purchase on a credit card because the card limit was drastically decreased, and there was no one left to process a basic contract to get that repair done. This is what happens when administrative staff disappear, it is not just an inconvenience, it directly affects whether firefighters have a safe place to sleep, whether they have power, whether they can be deployed effectively.

Maybe Elon didn't care about the maintenance crew, but turns out they are pretty important. And this is not an isolated incident. I have heard so many stories: Administrative staff responsible for coordinating travel for crews when a fire breaks out, gone; people who made sure fire response teams had their fuel and supplies ready, they are gone. And all of this is happening as we now head straight into what is going to be a dangerous fire season in Washington State.

So Chief Schultz, tell us, do you believe the Forest Service is ready for wildfire season given this absence of critical administrative and support staff; do you believe they are ready?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for the question. Yes, I do believe they are ready. And then some of the credit card issues you are talking about, we have adjusted those. We have had increases in cards, and we have been moving people into lateral positions to ensure critical vacancies that we are clear that we can fill those.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I can just tell you from on the ground, it feels like we are not prepared for this wildfire season. You just said we were. We will see what happens, but I fear I am going to be right.

Do I have time for one additional question? Thank you.

Now, the President supposedly wants to increase timber output from Federal lands by 25 percent. But here is the problem: This same administration is simultaneously cutting budgets, delaying funding, freezing hiring, and reducing staff at the Forest Service, the very agency that is responsible for that work. So how exactly is that going to work? Who is going to consult with the tribes? Who is going to lay out the sale plans? Who is going to mark the timber? Who is going to manage compliance and issue contracts when field offices have been literally decimated?

Is the expectation—Chief Schultz, is it really the expectation that these fewer people with fewer resources, less support, can somehow

deliver work at a faster pace and with greater complexity? How is that realistic?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for the question. So I think it is an iterative process. We don't have all the answers today, but in terms of how we are going to get there, we are going to again fill critical vacancies. We are also going to have to lean on partners differently. So the states, in Washington they have a very aggressive Good Neighbor Programs for the——

Senator MURRAY. Yes, the states are being relied on for just about virtually everything. And I got to tell you, firefighters don't sit, as my partner from Oregon knows, they don't sit in one state.

Mr. SCHULTZ. That is right. But to your point, though, we are going to be working with partners in a different way. We are going to have different kind of contracting terms, that we are going to have, looking at longer term contracts.

Senator MURRAY. Well, that begs the question. So do you have some kind of plan for this that is going to be executed over the next year? Because the wildfire season is here right now, and critical employees are not in place.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So when it comes to the wildfire season, yes ma'am, we do have the critical folks in place. When it comes to administering the timber program that you are talking about we are building that right now.

Senator MURRAY. Yes.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So that is part of what we are doing, is we are building that process, those interim operating plans. We are working on that right now. Yes ma'am.

Senator MURRAY. When will we see that?

Mr. SCHULTZ. You know, I would suspect in the next couple months we will have that whole plan figured out, how we are going to execute that for the next 4 years. That is what we are working on right now.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Thank you very much.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

And welcome, Mr. Schultz. I know you have got lots of experience in forestry and natural resource management in some of the Western states like Idaho and Montana, and my colleagues here on the dais all have large national forests in their states. But forest management looks a little different coming from a state like mine, of Maryland, and so I am going to spend a little time just describing how we do benefit from what you do at the Forest Service.

So in Maryland, the forest industry is our fourth-largest industry in the state. It is actually larger than the seafood industry. That surprises a lot of people. I hope you have had a chance to have some of our great Maryland crabs and Old Bay. Our forest industry contributes about \$3.5 billion to the local economy. That is about 5,000 jobs involved. So compared to Idaho, where 40 percent of the state's land mass is federally owned national forest land, Maryland is almost 40 percent forested, with three-quarters of those forested lands under private ownership.

And the amount of privately owned forest land in the state means that forest management needs are different, and it means

that the Forest Service has been a key partner in supporting those private landowners in the State of Maryland.

As Joe Hansen, who is the Board President of the Maryland Forest Association, said, and I quote, "Private lands and their management are absolutely crucial to the forest industry in Maryland. Technical assistance to these landowners from the Forest Service's state and private forestry budget is passed through the Maryland Forest Service, allowing DNR, Department of Natural Resources, foresters to work with private landowners to help them understand their options and make wise decisions for the management of their forest lands."

Mr. Schultz, this has been very important to our small forestry businesses that support our economy. The next generation of landowners needs to remain confident that markets for forest products will exist in the future for financial return to justify their management costs today. That is where wood product innovation comes in. In Western Maryland, a company called InventWood is in the process of setting up a factory that will mass-produce wood that is stronger than steel. This company was founded on research conducted at the University of Maryland with funding from the Forest Service.

The Forest Service wood innovations program and related research supports projects like InventWood and advances the onshoring of the next generation of Made in America building materials, which is critical to the supply chain here in Maryland and across the country.

I should say we have also seen benefits from the urban forestry initiatives in cities like Baltimore. A great example is the Stillmeadow Peace Park in West Baltimore. Through the Forest Service's urban forestry program, the Stillmeadow Community Fellowship, which is a local faith-based community, was able to restore 10 acres of urban forest land and create a workforce development program to train Baltimore youth to enter the forestry industry, and creating important opportunities as well as environmental benefits.

And finally, our forestry is key to our decades-long effort to protect the Chesapeake Bay, a national treasure and an important economic engine for our region. In 1988, this has been decades in practice and implementation, an MOU was signed between the USEPA and the U.S. Forest Service, committing the Forest Service, through its state and private forestry program, to support Chesapeake Bay's restoration effort.

So in very different ways, the work of the Forest Service is very important to the State of Maryland, which is why I am extremely concerned that these accounts that I am referencing were zeroed out in the President's budget. I can tell you I will be working with my colleagues, on a bipartisan basis, to make sure that we preserve and support these efforts.

But I understand the budget that you submitted, but I just want to ask you, if you will commit to working with me and my colleagues in the State of Maryland to make sure that the Forest Service remains an important partner in our efforts?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, yes sir. I think I want to point out, too, I think there is some confusion on the Wood Innovation Grants.

That is a very popular program, and that will continue in this budget. That money would transfer to, basically, the Department of Interior under the component that we transfer the fuels program with. It is about \$175 million. So about 30 million of that is the Wood Innovation Grant funds, so that program would continue on, it would just be administered through the Department of Interior, and we would coordinate with them to administer that program.

So the University of Maryland, which is a land-grant university, and they do a lot of great work there. Yes, sir. And that is something that would continue under this budget.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I will take a look at that. I also do just want to express my concerns, and I know Senator Heinrich, and maybe others, raised the issue about the Forest and Rangeland Research Account funding.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sure.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. And I understand you mentioned that, you know, a lot of that work could be done at universities, like University of Maryland. As you know, a lot of the programs at University of Maryland, the one I referenced, was actually funded through the Forest Service, so if you cut out that account, they are not really in a position to do it, especially when, as I am sure you are aware, universities are seeing their budgets cut, and they are actually this administration is blocking a lot of research to our colleges and universities around the country.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you. But I look forward to working with you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen.

So Chief, I mentioned in my opening comments the concerns about the shift of wildfire management operations by proposing to merge the BLM and Forest Service operations into this U.S. Wildland Fire Service based over in the Department of Interior. And again, I want to understand more about this. I do think it makes sense to be looking for efficiencies, how we battle our wildfires, how we deal with them in this country is exceptionally important to all of us.

And so as we are learning more, it is important for us, from the appropriations perspective, to understand how we can best make this thing work, because I don't want to be building an airplane literally and doing this reorganization when, to Senator Merkley's point, you have got horrible wildfires going across our country, and they don't care whether or not we are ready.

So just a little, almost generically, in terms of the goals of the consolidation—I am assuming this is about greater efficiencies. This is helping to be better stewards of our taxpayer dollars, but how do these goals really bolster the ability of our country to respond to the fires?

And I want to ask particularly about the National Interagency Fire Center. You are obviously very familiar with it. It has been beneficial to interagency coordination for wildland fire. How is this consolidation going to impact that center that is based there in Boise? Are we going to need to detail additional people there? Can you just speak to more granular level on what this proposal really will do?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for the question. So the intent of this consolidation really is to improve efficiencies, as you alluded to. It is improved communication and coordination, even how we do training, even though we have interagency training standards, not all of the agencies train to the same degree and the same requirements to move up through the system.

So the intent really is to standardize things across the board and have a unified firefighting force that would do both initial attack and extended attack on these programs. The budget also proposes to move the fuels programs. There has been a lot of discussion here about mitigation of wildfire and the fuels work that needs to be done. That would also move as well in this process.

So currently, the fuels program is administered by the firefighting workforce that we have, so those folks would all move to this new agency. This agency would both do the fuels work as well as the firefighting work on initial attack and extended attack. We don't have the details all worked out yet. We are not talking about this summer, we are talking about in the future, in the next year. But this is something that we are committed to working through with the Department of Interior to work through this.

The other piece to keep in mind right now is you talked about National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC). So NIFC has a representative from the Forest Service. There is a representative that is already there in Boise, so we don't need to move people there. We already have a representation there, but also you have four different bureaus within Department of Interior that are there. You also have the Association of State Foresters has a representative that represents the state interests.

So the intent is to really consolidate that so they are working under the same administrative structure, so that there is just greater coordination, communication as we administer the firefighting program.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So when you have got—I am trying to understand kind of what is left with the Forest Service, if you move this out, and then when you have management decisions, say, for instance, with wildfire thinning, some of the resiliency activities, those stay within National Forest Service, right?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, ma'am.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay. So would the Wildland Fire Service have any responsibility for making decisions in that area? And if so, what happens if you have got a disagreement over a proposed action, how do you mediate or manage this? Or maybe you don't have a conflict because it is clear lines? Or is that something that still has yet to be thought out?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So Senator, it is what we do with the states today. We have agreements with the states. We have master agreements.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yes.

Mr. SCHULTZ. We also have agreements with other local government cooperators, and in those agreements you lay out expectations in terms of how we are going to pay for fires, how we are going to communicate on fires. So ideally what you would have is the Forest Service would have some type of master agreement with this entity that would create the clarity of expectations so that when the fire season came you could anticipate that.

And if there are issues that come up, which there are issues that come up every year you would work towards fixing those over the next years in the future.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So we would do after-action reviews and those things to identify any issues that were not fully worked out in any particular year, and we do that every year. We review the fire season and identify what concerns or issues that we might have and work through them.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But I guess I am thinking about it, so you have got the response, you have got that end of it, but if you are looking at a—if you are looking at an area where you know you need to do—you need to go in and do thinning, you want to go in and do some controlled burns within our national forest, that is not necessarily on the wildland fire side. That is kind of the management side.

And again, I am trying to understand: What is left of the Forest Service after we move this out? What are you managing? To me, when I am thinking about management of a forest, I am thinking about what it means to be able to reduce the threat from invasive species and disease, to reduce the threat by doing some thinning, because that is not kind of like your fire management plan for the season. How do you divide that up?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So Senator, I think there are two questions there, and one is: What is left of the Forest Service?

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So we would have still timber.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. We would have recreation, we would have mining, we would have grazing, all those forestry.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But in order to have healthy timber, you know you need to talk about thinning.

Mr. SCHULTZ. That is right.

Senator MURKOWSKI. You need to talk about invasive species and disease.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right. And we do that today. You think about, we have Good Neighbor Agreements with the states.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So it is not uncommon that a state will come in and do timber sale administration on Forest Service lands. So imagine a similar type of concept where we are working with this entity that has money for fuels, which they could do prescribed fires, they could do mechanical treatments, but they would be working for the Forest Service.

And to your point, the Forest Service would still be the one making those decisions, but we would be leveraging those resources in Interior to get that work done on the National Forest System. That is how I would envision that would work. It would have to be a co-ordinated.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Yes. I always worry, though, when we are leveraging resources in another department and you have the potential for conflict. I am well over my time. But you can tell I am very interested in understanding more, I get what you are saying, that you are still working through some of these details.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But know that we want to be part of these discussions in fully understanding the direction.

Let me turn to Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you very much. So I am going to ask the team to put the chart back up. One line in this is Forest Health Management, which you told me a few minutes ago that, yes, you are going to be distributing those grants to states. I am glad to hear that. But also, the chart shows that you are planning to zero out the program in fiscal year 2026, assuming this is what you are proposing. We will see what Congress does.

But in that regard to Forest Health Management, I must say that we have challenges like sudden oak death, which there is a variety that could threaten Douglas fir trees; are you familiar with that particular disease?

Mr. SCHULTZ. I am not, sir. No.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, I know that Douglas trees also continue on into parts of Idaho and parts of Montana, but a huge concentration in Oregon. That is why we have programs like Forest Health Management, it is to detect risks to our forests, to do the research, and to deploy the resources to try to take on those challenges. Why would you propose zeroing that out?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think, again, part of this whole budget is to try to figure out what we can afford to maintain, and what makes sense to either have another entity do it. And for instance, on the forest health discussion, a lot of states have their own forest health programs above and beyond funding that comes from the Federal Government. And I know the industry does a lot of their own forest health monitoring as well. So if there is an opportunity for others to step into that space, I think that is what we would try to coordinate with that on.

Senator MERKLEY. Do you have any studies that have shown that that work being done in other venues is sufficient to address the risk to our massive Federal forests?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I am aware there is a lot of private companies that do this work in the United States and elsewhere, that they use satellite technology to address, to identify forest health issues. So outside of what the Forest Service does or funds, I can tell you there is a lot of work going on in the private sector that could facilitate some of this being done.

Senator MERKLEY. So let me just note that what I am hearing is that there is a lot of key work done in this line, very relevant to our Federal forests that cannot be obtained from other sources. I think we need to take a very close look at that. But if you have any studies which show that work that is being replicated elsewhere, we would certainly be interested in seeing it.

I want to turn to the next line, which is State Fire Capacity Grants, and the one after it: Volunteer Fire Capacity. And these are also being—you have said you are going to distribute these funds this year, great. But these funds, the first one, the State Fire Capacity Grants goes to the state level and helps them with the programs they have, some of those programs are going to be shut down if they don't have the grants to continue them.

The second one, the Volunteer Fire Capacity, this is very much about small rural fire stations. And when we have lightning storms, we have the possibility of a hundred fires being lit at once. And getting our rural teams out fast, and they are normally volunteer teams to put those out before they become a larger fire, particularly a fire that might be whipped up by the wind and grow very rapidly, is extremely important. So in what world does it make sense to devastate the ability of rural fire stations to tackle fires early?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, so I think in terms of the strategy, you are talking about is a relevant strategy, and Oregon has actually been a leader in rangeland fire protection associations. As you are fully aware, Eastern Oregon, they use that model to put out a lot of wildfires, and a lot of that funding, in many cases, is provided by other entities, states, and even, like in Idaho, we have rangeland fire protection associations. Some of those costs are borne by the lessees and permittees themselves that do that work.

So what we are trying to suggest in this budget is that there needs to be a shift in how these programs are funded in the future, and there is going to be a shift again in the budget to put greater reliance on the states and local government to cover those costs on their own without that direct Federal support.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, I think I hear in that a lot of: We hope somebody else will do this work when we quit doing it, because it is very important work. I think you are well familiar with the state budgets in Idaho and Montana, and I think your wish that somehow they are going to come up with funds to do things, is unrealistic in the context of many other challenges those State governments are facing.

So there has been a Federal-local partnership, and certainly it is very relevant because the local areas help us fight the fires on Federal forest land. And I appreciate the rangeland associations you are speaking to, but not all of our forests are rangelands. Many of them depend on crews in highly forested areas that are local fire stations, and those crews are actually having more and more difficulty recruiting volunteers because many of those volunteers are, essentially, to put it bluntly, getting old, and we are having a much harder time recruiting younger folks.

It is a tougher economy, often both parents working, so on, and so forth. So I think it may actually be an area that is going to need more support rather than less.

I do have more questions, but I know my time is up, so I will be submitting them for the record. But these are very important issues for us to wrestle with as a committee.

And let us turn to my colleague.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

Chief, glad you will be in North Dakota in August to meet with some of our grazers. Very important on the national grasslands, and that the Forest Service is in the process of updating the Little Missouri National Grasslands Travel Management Plan, that will affect, in North Dakota, Billings County, Golden Valley County, Slope County, McKenzie County.

So we appreciate that work and look forward to working with you closely on it. Will you commit to not only consult with the

State of North Dakota, but specifically our Ag Commissioner, Doug Goehring, who is very knowledgeable, is a farmer himself, and rancher, and works very closely with the grazers? Would you be sure to include him in your consultation?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, yes, we will. You bet.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Chief. And then also, are you committed to making sure that travel management plan works for our grazers and for our energy industry?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Chief. Another area actually that the Agency has been doing some really good work is in noxious weed control. The Deputy Chief, Chris French, has been outstanding. He has been out to North Dakota a number of times, he has been very responsive, and has done an excellent job of helping us with noxious weed control, which is something that has historically not been the case.

And so I really want to commend him, the Agency, and ask if you will continue that commitment to that very important work.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, if I look correctly, I think there is about \$1.3 million that is going to be allocated for this year that will be forthcoming soon, and we will continue that work. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. I really want to commend you on that, it is incredibly important and it doesn't matter whether it is tourism, or agriculture, you name it, for the health of the grasslands. And historically, we have had to just fight tooth and nail to get it, and you all have been good. And I just encourage you to continue that. And again want to express my appreciation.

Another issue is the prairie dogs. And you know, we understand in the park, you know, they want prairie dogs, and folks like to have them around, all that kind of thing, but they still have to be managed so that they don't completely encroach on the grazers' allotments. And I have been out to some of those, I guess you could call them pastures, but it looks like the moon.

I mean, they dug—and there is not a blade of grass left. It is just a bunch of holes. It is dangerous to, you know, if livestock goes over it. It is terrible. And the idea that we can allow these prairie dog counts to grow and create that kind of situation that actually is detrimental to the environment. And so are you committed to helping us control, or manage, I should say, the prairie dog population in a common-sense way?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir. I think I have looked at. And it looks to me that over the last 5 years we have allocated about \$500,000 to help with some of the management of the prairie dogs. You are right, they can be devastating to the range productivity. It is a threat for livestock, you know, like you said, stepping in a hole or something. So it is something we definitely need to work with.

Senator HOEVEN. Yeah, and just reasonable buffers, I mean, just reasonable buffers between what is ranched and all that kind of thing, and then where you want the prairie dogs for tourism or whatever, right?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. That is a common sense. And then the last thing I would bring up to you is access. The grazers have got to have access on those section lines to get out, in order to move their

cattle and do all those things. And so would you work with us on section lines in making sure that, whether it is the energy industry, grazers, or even folks that are out there for tourism, all that kind of stuff, have reasonable access in the grasslands on the section lines?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. All right. Again, thank you. Look forward to working with you. Appreciate it very much.

Mr. SCHULTZ. You bet.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Thank you.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

Senator HOEVEN. If there is no further testimony, or questions at this point, questions can still be submitted for the record, and then we would ask that those are due by June 18th. And then we would like a response, if possible, within two weeks, if that is something you could do.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. All right. Thank you very much.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO HON. TOM SCHULTZ

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Question. The Forest Service has a statutory responsibility to assist and support healthy ecosystems across jurisdictional lines, not just within the 193 million acres of the National Forest System. However, it is clear that the Administration sees no value in State, Private, and Tribal Forestry grants because the President's FY2026 Budget proposes to fully eliminate them. States and landowners put these resources into forest stewardship, fuels reduction, and forest health, which are important due to the interconnected nature of the checkerboard landscape.

Did you speak directly to any state foresters about this funding elimination?

Answer. The discretionary account was eliminated to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and State governments. In alignment with restoring federalism, we encourage increasing State authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities.

Question. Without Federal support, how will States have the resources to partner with each other and the Federal Government on forest health and risk reduction that crosses jurisdictional lines?

Answer. The Budget request anchors to a return to federalism and encourages increasing state authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests.

Question. What is your plan for confronting a new pest or disease we haven't dealt with before without research or funding the Federal Government can provide to States for containment, particularly issues that cross jurisdictional lines?

Answer. Secretary Rollins made an Emergency Situation Determination on over 112 million acres of National Forest System Lands using authorities provided through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. In designated areas, the Secretary authorized emergency actions including removal of hazardous fuels, harvest of trees to control insects or disease, replanting in fire impacted areas and several other actions. In response to the Secretary's direction, the agency is increasing our forest management efforts that will result in more timber and hazardous fuels mitigated from the National Forests, improving forest health and providing the ability to address emerging issues on National Forest System lands through existing programs and authorities.

Question. For State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance, where do you expect communities and volunteer fire departments to find funding overnight to replace these grants?

Answer. The FY 2026 President's Budget eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and State gov-

ernments. The Administration seeks to restore federalism by encouraging States and local partners to fund their wildfire preparedness activities in alignment with local priorities.

Question. The President's FY2026 Budget proposes to completely eliminate Federal funding for forest research. Even if the private sector or universities fill in some gaps, the findings won't be fully open and freely available to anyone to pick up a good idea and turn it into tomorrow's innovations or improve silviculture practices on their property.

How will the United States be able to meet the challenges of future stressors and changing conditions on our forests without Federal science?

Answer. The FY 2026 Budget terminates the Forest and Rangeland Research program to ensure fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars and appropriate alignment of resources with the Forest Service's responsibility to appropriately steward National Forest System lands.

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program. In addition, per the FY 2026 Budget proposal, the Joint Fire Science Program would continue to be supported in the proposed Department of the Interior Wildland Fire Service.

Question. The 81 Experimental Forests in the Forest and Rangeland Research program produces invaluable science and tools necessary to manage forests across all ownerships. The President's FY2026 Budget proposal to eliminate funding for Forest and Rangeland Research will shut down long-term observations and studies at these experimental forests, putting at risk decades and decades of data and investigation for understanding the forest ecosystem and forest contributions to our communities, and to predict future forest conditions used by Federal and State managers, private landowners and industry.

How does the Forest Service plan to support the continuation of an experimental forest network and the information it provides for both management of National Forest System lands and non-federal lands by eliminating all research funds?

Answer. The FY 2026 Budget terminates the Forest and Rangeland Research program to ensure fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars and appropriate alignment of resources with the Forest

Service's responsibility to appropriately steward National Forest System lands. Experimental forests and ranges will remain in the ownership of the agency and will be managed in accordance with the Administration's priorities.

Question. I am concerned that the Administration is planning and implementing staffing reductions in these Research programs now in service to the President's FY2026 Budget proposal before Congress has acted on it.

Will you commit to continuing to operate all of the research stations, labs and experimental forests funded in fiscal year 2024 without interruption until you are instructed otherwise by Appropriations law?

Answer. For FY 2025 operations, the President is acting within his authority under the "Full Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025" to revise spending within the amounts provided by Congress.

Question. The President's FY2026 Budget proposes to eliminate the International Program and Trade office. It is through this Office's work that the Forest Service meets its statutory responsibility for enforcing the Lacey Act's regulation of wildlife and plant trade, to prevent illegal logging overseas and protect domestic producers and markets. The Office also promotes American wood products globally and supports U.S. companies in the face of tariffs imposed by other countries. Since 2019, they have provided the critical forensic analysis for over 130 cases of illegal imports brought by Homeland Security and other enforcement agencies.

Without Lacey Act enforcement, the wood identification and screening center, or the programs that work internationally to keep illegal logging from occurring in the first place, how will the Forest Service protect the U.S. timber industry from an influx of illegal lumber?

Answer. The FY 2026 request provides for sustained support for Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) operations, the lynchpin of our Lacey Act enforcement capacity on and off National Forest Lands. The Agency will continue to deliver on its statutory Lacey Act enforcement responsibilities.

Question. If International Programs and Trade is eliminated, how will the Forest Service address wood export barriers like the European Union Deforestation Regulation and Chinese bans on softwood logs from the United States?

Answer. The FY 2026 request eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate role of the United States in international natural resources efforts.

Question. I am frustrated that while the Administration claims to be focused on efficiencies, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration program, a proven, bipartisan model that delivers healthier forests and stronger communities and avoids costly, dragged out litigation, is eliminated in the President's FY2026 Budget.

Will you confirm for the record that you are moving forward with funding the existing Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration projects in 2025 at the full funding level of \$31 million?

Answer. Yes.

Question. If Congress once again funds the program in FY2026, will you carry out our direction and fund Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration projects?

Answer. We will implement programs within the bounds of the appropriations bill's legislative text and the Administration's priorities.

Question. A major aspect of the President's FY2026 Budget is removing fire-fighting responsibilities from the Forest Service and creating a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service at the Department of the Interior. It is difficult to seriously evaluate this proposal from an Administration that is jeopardizing our wildfire preparedness by firing staff, threatening to cut funding from State, local, and volunteer fire departments, and intentionally managing by imposing chaos and fear. Because we are already into fire season there should be absolutely no further disruption imposed on wildland fire response. This proposal is just a proposal and must not be acted upon without an explicit change in law.

Yes or No—Will you commit not to proceed with any changes to Federal wildland fire management during fire season?

Answer. Yes.

Question. Yes or No—Will you commit to follow our clear and longstanding Appropriations law that funds these two agencies separately, and work with Congress on a careful and deliberative legislative process for making any changes?

Answer. We will implement programs within the bounds of the appropriations bill's legislative text and the Administration's priorities.

Question. What obstacles to achieving important forest resilience work could occur if the Budget proposal separating fire management from land management becomes law?

Answer. The new organization will focus on response to wildfire but will assist both the DOI bureaus and the Forest Service in delivering critical land management actions. A coordinated effort across Federal agencies has always been critical to effectively managing our Federal lands. This consolidation builds on that tradition and will continue to leverage our multi-agency approach to Federal land management outside the boundaries of wildland fire response. In particular, the Forest Service will work with the U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) at DOI to build a comprehensive hazardous fuels program to deliver both commercial and non-commercial wildfire risk reduction benefit. USWFS leadership will work with the Forest Service to ensure effective, risk-based hazardous fuels management on FS land, improving on the uncollaborative and siloed approach in the last administration that produced competing and uncoordinated hazardous fuel management strategies.

Question. Were you and your senior career staff, who have fought wildfire over their careers, consulted on this proposal?

Answer. USDA staff and policy officials have worked closely with Administration leadership and the Department of the Interior on the proposal.

Question. Who in the Administration is spearheading the Wildland Fire Service proposal? To whom should Congress, the States, and other stakeholders direct our questions?

Answer. This is an interagency process and questions can be directed to USDA or DOI.

Question. We have heard proposals and musings from this Administration in support of selling or otherwise disposing of Federal lands. Americans are adamantly opposed to this. A poll by the Trust for Public Land found that 74% of Americans oppose the closure of public lands and 71% oppose selling public lands to the highest bidder. The President's FY2026 Budget includes reference to a "land transfer initiative" to transfer national forest lands to States and Tribes, including all existing Job Corps sites.

Will you commit to us today that the Administration will not change the status of statutorily created special management areas, national recreation areas, national monuments, or other special management areas on National Forest System lands?

Answer. The Forest Service will continue to work within the Agency's and President's authorities for all land management activities.

Question. Under what current authorities would the Forest Service implement this "land transfer initiative" proposal?

Answer. The Forest Service currently has limited conveyance authorities such as those under the Small Tracts Act.

Question. Is additional statutory authority, through legislation, required to institute the “land transfer initiative” proposed in the President’s FY206 Budget?

Answer. The Administration will continue to work with Congress on any additional authorities needed for the larger initiative.

Question. What is the list of proposed sites for disposal (including their location, size, and current use) that constitute the 1 million acres being considered for the “land transfer initiative” proposed in the President’s FY2026 Budget?

Answer. It is important to note that the Federal estate is considerable and at its current size challenging to manage within the financial resources available. The lands transfer initiative included in the FY 2026 Budget would right-size the Federal estate and reduce Federal costs for land management and asset maintenance. It will return these lands to the governments closest to the people who use them—local governments that understand and respect the needs and desires of their communities far better than the Federal Government. The Administration continues to develop this initiative and will release further details as appropriate.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Question. The Wood Innovation Grant Program has been funded through the United States Forest Service’s (USFS) Hazardous Fuels account in previous years, including covering the cost of at least 16 USFS staff to manage these programs. In the FY2026 budget proposal, the Administration proposes to move the Hazardous Fuels account and funds from USFS to Department of Interior (DOI). In the hearing, you stated that the Wood Innovation Grant Program will continue at DOI as a part of this transfer, funded at about \$30 million. However, the information currently available in the President’s Budget does not support that statement, as there is no mention of continuing the Wood Innovation Grant Program at DOI as a part of the proposed Hazardous Fuels account transfer.

Can you confirm for the record, consistent with your statement during the hearing, that the Wood Innovations Grant Program would continue to be funded at roughly \$30 million?

Answer. Wood Innovations is not a standalone funded program but rather has historically been funded through annual congressional funding directives. It continues to be a priority of the Administration and is expected to be part of the Department of the Interior’s ongoing implementation of the hazardous fuels program that is transferred from the Forest Service.

Question. How will you budget for the USFS staff needed to continue the management of the grant program?

Answer. The agency will focus staff on delivering the priorities of the Administration.

Question. In 1988, the USFS committed to supporting the implementation of the Chesapeake Bay Program’s restoration efforts by signing an MOU with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Through its State, Private, and Tribal Forestry Program, the USFS has had an office with permanent full-time staff located in the EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program Office since 1992. This office has led efforts to maintain forest health, including urban forests, and to restore riparian forest buffers throughout the 64,000 square miles of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The USFS has been instrumental in many of the Chesapeake Bay Program’s successes in restoration progress. In the hearing, you acknowledged extensive layoffs, delayed resignations, and early retirements have reduced the USFS workforce.

Given USFS staff reductions and elimination of the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry budget accounts, how will the USFS continue its commitment to support and collaborate with the EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program?

Answer. The FY 2026 request eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and State governments. The budget request anchors to a return to federalism, which is a priority for the Trump Administration, and encourages increasing State and local governments’ authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities in alignment with local priorities.

Question. How many USFS employees are currently working full-time in the EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program’s Office?

Answer. As of July 2025, we have one employee working fulltime in the EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program office in Annapolis.

Question. How many USFS employees who were working on the Chesapeake Bay Program have left because of layoffs, deferred resignations, or early retirements since the start of the current administration?

Answer. Since the start of the current administration, we had one employee leave the Chesapeake Bay Program through the voluntary Deferred Resignation Program.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH

Question. The Forest Service projected last year that it would treat 4 million acres for hazardous fuels in Fiscal Year 2025. Please provide the number of acres so far treated this fiscal year for hazardous fuels, divided by treatment type (i.e. prescribed fire, mechanical treatment, etc.), month, and state.

Answer. Please see attachment 1 to this QFR.

[illegible]

[illegible]

State & Type of Activity	Hazardous Fuels Activities on National Forest System Lands (Acres, FY25 to Date)											
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Total	
Vermont	8			20		204	240	91	24		587	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire	8			20		204		12	24		268	
Virginia	44		15	377		638	1,939	79	41		3,054	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire	44		15	377		111	145		41		733	
Washington	7,996	16,041	520	269	140	4,505	5,252	1,636	1,123	1,468	2,321	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire	2,792	449		188		4,021	10	833	1,123	1,468	10,883	
Natural Wildfire Meeting Objectives	5,204	7,992	520	81	140	484	5,242	803			20,466	
West Virginia		7,600									7,600	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire				32		411	641				1,084	
Wisconsin	1,028	316	334	838	1,388	1,092	803	1,664	62	15	32	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire						411	641				1,052	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire	1,028	316	290	747	854	1,091	700	893	12	15	5,945	
Wyoming	1,126	3,440	91,365	4,955	2,553	192	2,219	1,865	3,098	59	15,995	
Mechanical & Other Prescribed Fire	1,027	2,548	664	4,112	459	192		432	482	59	110,871	
Natural Wildfire Meeting Objectives	99	709	771	843	2,094		2,219	1,433	2,616		10,784	
Grand Total	304,747	279,328	269,953	112,692	264,528	239,507	287,471	130,011	43,226	35,991	90,113	
											1,967,455	

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator HOEVEN. And with that, then the hearing is completed. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:55 a.m., Wednesday, June 11, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]

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