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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

June 25, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

I am troubled by reports of interference in the funding and communication of science at the Department of the Interior (DOI). Science plays a critical role in the development of public policy, law and regulations. The public and policymakers must be able to trust that federally funded science is reliably conducted and is free from interference or suppression.

In the America COMPETES Act of 2007, Congress affirmed that federal scientists could communicate scientific findings freely with the public and Congress. Following passage of that law, each federal agency that funds more than \$100 million in scientific research developed a scientific integrity policy to ensure that independent science fully and transparently informs policy decisions and is free from inappropriate political or ideological influence. DOI implemented a scientific integrity policy in December 2014, which is intended to “guide and ensure the integrity of science and scientific product developed and used by the Department.”¹

Recent DOI policy decisions regarding federally funded science may violate DOI’s own scientific integrity policy and certainly violates the spirit of the law. I am requesting justification for how the following policy decisions are compatible with the DOI’s scientific integrity policy.

- In December 2017, DOI implemented a policy that requires a political appointee to review grants over \$50,000, including research grants already awarded funding and grants awarded through a competitive peer review process.² DOI’s Code of Scientific and Scholarly Conduct, adhered to by all DOI employees, requires employees to act in “the interest of the advancement of science and scholarship for sound decision making, by contributing or using the most appropriate, best available, high quality scientific data and information to inform the mission of the Department.” How can the department adhere to this policy if it is choosing what science to fund rather than relying on peer review, the gold standard for funding science?

¹ Department of the Interior. *Department Manuel, Chapter 3: Integrity of Scientific and Scholarly Activities*. <https://www.doi.gov/scientificintegrity>.

² Department of the Interior. *Guidance for Financial Assistance Actions Effective in Fiscal Year 2018*. <https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/national/interior-guidance-for-fiscal-2018-grants/2698/>

- Prior to this new policy, on August 18, 2017, the department ordered the cancellation of two studies already underway. The National Academy of Sciences was ordered to discontinue a DOI-funded survey of studies on the health impacts of mountaintop removal coal mining. Additionally, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement stopped a study on offshore oil and gas inspections.³ Again, the DOI scientific integrity policy underscores the importance of using the best available science to inform department policy. It also prohibits decision makers from censoring science or acting in a manner that “affects the planning, conduct, reporting, or use of scientific activities.”⁴ The cancelled studies would have provided important environmental, safety and public health information beneficial to DOI and other federal agencies.
- In June 2018, the *Washington Post* reported that DOI employees presenting research papers and studies at scientific conferences would have to submit their presentations for review before receiving approval to attend the conference. The agency’s policy on scientific integrity states that it is the policy of DOI to “facilitate the free flow of scientific information” and that “scientists and scholars may speak to the media and public about scientific matters based on their official work and areas of expertise.”⁵ A DOI spokesperson stated that the new policy was to ensure that attendance at the conference, and presumably the research presented, was related to one of the secretary’s ten broad priorities. Does that mean scientists whose research findings are counter to these priorities will not be approved for travel?
- In June 2018, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) scientists would need to get agency approval for some interviews with the press.⁶ This new policy will put a political appointee in the position of approving or denying a federal scientist from communicating scientific findings with the press. This policy will impede scientists from getting timely information to the public, directly in conflict with the scientific integrity policy and the direction of title 42 U.S. Code Section 6620.

Attempting to suppress science is a troubling pattern I’m seeing across the federal government. NOAA, an agency key to understanding weather and climate, is reportedly attempting to change its mission statement in a way that deemphasizes the conservation and management missions of the Department of Commerce and eliminates references to climate change research.

³ Department of the Interior Inspector General. *Letter to Committee on Natural Resources*. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/DOI%20IG%20Letter%20on%20Cancellation%20of%20NAS%20Mountaintop%20Removal%20Mining%20Study%20June%207%202018.pdf>

⁴ Department of the Interior. *Department Manual, Chapter 3: Integrity of Scientific and Scholarly Activities*. <https://www.doi.gov/scientificintegrity>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-trump-policy-usgs-scientists-20180621-story.html>

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While climate change, conservation and sound stewardship of natural resources might not be the top political priorities for this administration, they are top priorities for my constituents. Florida is on the front lines of sea level rise and at risk of severe weather like hurricanes. The Everglades, the Florida Reef Tract and our treasured natural resources are fundamental to both the economy and the lifestyle of my state.

A political review of peer reviewed science is extremely inappropriate and threatens the scientific reputation of the department. Furthermore, prohibiting federal scientists from presenting at conferences or otherwise engaging with the public is clearly a violation of the department's policy and the law. Please address these matters in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



BILL NELSON
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable John Thune, Chairman