

**U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation**

**Nominations Hearing of Mr. Viqar Ahmad**

**December 1, 2021**

**Questions for the Record – Minority**

**Ranking Member Roger Wicker**

**Question 1:** *The Department of Commerce OIG (Office of the Inspector General) identified the Department's Management Matters Involving Acquisitions and Grants and NOAA's (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) satellite governance as top management challenges in fiscal year 2022. If confirmed, what recommendations would you implement to address these challenges?*

**Response:**

To address the management challenges involving acquisitions and grants in NOAA's satellite programs and other areas, I will leverage and strengthen existing Departmental procedures for suspension and debarment, for overseeing bureau grant and procurement management offices, and for conducting Acquisition and Program Management reviews of major acquisitions. In addition, I will continue to invest in the Department's acquisition workforce by expanding the number of program managers and contracting professionals with specialized training in IT and Digital Services, operationalizing the Department's acquisition innovation lab, and maintaining and expanding the Program Management Community of Practice. I will also continue to leverage the Department's Acquisition Project Management Framework and Milestone Review Board to maintain oversight of and insight into the Department's mission critical programs including NOAA's satellite programs.

**Question 2:** *What are your top priorities for the Department, and if confirmed, what steps would you take to address those priorities?*

**Response:**

My top priority, if confirmed, would be to help the Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and other senior leadership put forth the best budget to support the Department of Commerce's strategic needs. Second, I believe we must provide evidence to Congress, the public, and our other agency partners that we are good stewards of public resources. Finally, I will ensure our human resource focus is on recruiting, developing, and retaining a well-rounded cadre that understands not just how to do a job, but how varied functional expertise plays into the overall mission.

I will review existing policies, procedures, practices, and consult with senior career staff on issues of concern. I will meet with Inspector General Gustafson to discuss the most recent management challenges outlined in her report. Ultimately, maintaining a close partnership with

staff, colleagues at the bureaus, and OMB will be important to our success. We will establish metrics, track progress, and take a proactive approach to mitigate any issues.

Equally important, I remain committed to maintaining open lines of communication with you and your staff on the important work of the Department.

***Question 3:*** *A recent report from the OIG was highly critical of Enterprise Services' (ES) management and oversight of its blanket purchase agreement (BPA) with Accenture. While ES may not report directly to the CFO, if confirmed, how would you ensure that taxpayer dollars are in fact getting the agreed upon deliverables for this BPA and each of DOC's other contracts?*

**Response:**

If confirmed as the CFO and ASA, I will ensure that strong oversight is provided to Department's acquisitions and blanket purchase agreements. Through the oversight efforts of the Senior Procurement Executive and Office of Acquisition Management, I will ensure effective tools are used so that the Department receives quality services and products procured with taxpayer dollars in the Department's bureaus and offices. With respect to this specific OIG audit of the ES BPA, I will ensure the Corrective Action Plan addresses the core concerns in the report and that any lessons learned are applied throughout the Department.

***Question 4:*** *The OIG report also contained 11 recommendations for the Department to implement. While a corrective action plan is due back to the OIG within 60 calendar days, what involvement will you have to ensure each recommendation is adequately addressed, and that subsequent actions are taken?*

**Response:**

While I am aware of this OIG report, I have not been briefed on the Corrective Action Plan that is under development. If confirmed, I will meet early on in my tenure with Inspector General Gustafson to review the most recent audits and management findings, including the Accenture report. I will ensure that Corrective Action Plans are in place and that Department staff is aggressively taking action to close open recommendations and address the findings. I will also meet with Enterprise Services leadership to ensure the staff is taking strong action to implement recommendations and further enhance their contract oversight.

**Senator Marsha Blackburn**

**Question 1:** *It's my understanding that in 2020, the Department of Commerce obligated over \$10 billion for contractual goods and services, grants, and other financial awards. Can you please tell me how you will conduct a more transparent and accountable grant process for awardees?*

**Response:**

In 2020, the Department obligated over \$10 billion in procurements, grants and other contractual services, with procurements being the largest component. The Department follows federal regulations prescribed in the FAR to ensure transparent and accountable awards. With the dramatic increase in grants, the Department has been focused on instituting program management practices to track progress on the billions of dollars in grant program funding starting with the CARES Act in 2020. If confirmed, I will make sure we have a dashboard which provides an internal status update, including a proactive approach to identify areas of concern. The goal will be to have visibility at each stage of the process: from enactment of legislative authority, Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), application, and evaluation through award. I will ensure that the bureaus remain committed to tracking the details and having a transparent and accountable process using the grants.gov and USAspending.gov tools that serve the federal government.

**Senator Rick Scott**

**Question 1:** *The Department of Commerce oversees the disbursement of varying grant programs, ranging from fishery and coastal protection to broadband buildout and economic development. How will you ensure these are awarded fairly, transparently, and consistently?*

**Response:**

I share your commitment to ensuring public resources are deployed in accordance with the law and done so in a and fair, transparent, and consistent manner. The Department follows federal regulations prescribed in the FAR to ensure transparent and accountable awards. With the dramatic increase in grants, the Department has been focused on instituting program management practices to track progress on the billions of dollars in grant program funding starting with the CARES Act in 2020. If confirmed, I will make sure we have a dashboard which provides an internal status update, including a proactive approach to identify areas of concern. The goal will be to have visibility at each stage of the process: from enactment of legislative authority, Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), application, and evaluation through award. I will ensure that the bureaus remain committed to tracking the details and having a transparent and accountable process using the grants.gov and USAspending.gov tools that serve the federal government.

**Question 2:** *I am concerned with the national security threat that Communist Chinese drones pose to our federal agencies. I have introduced the American Drone Security Act to prohibit the federal procurement of drones that pose such a threat. Do you commit to not procuring any drones that are manufactured in Communist China for the Department of Commerce – including NOAA?*

**Response:**

The Department is a member of the Federal Acquisition Security Council (FASC), with participation by the Chief Information Officer, Special Procurement Executive, and National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). The FASC is the federal government organization that is responsible for tracking, evaluating, and processing entity list additions and or adjustments. The Department has an internal Supply Chain Risk Management process that ensures items requested for procurement meet the section 889 and other security requirements before authorization to purchase is granted. I will ensure that these memberships and processes are maintained and enhanced as needed to protect the Department and the equities of the Federal Government.