

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 7, 2019

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Acting Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Acting Secretary Bernhardt:

On December 22, 2018, funding for the Department of the Interior (DOI) lapsed, requiring the shutdown of most agency functions and the furloughing of tens of thousands of DOI employees. For the past 17 days, President Trump and Republicans in Congress have harmed the American public, federal employees, and federal contractors, put healthcare for over two million Native Americans at risk, and endangered visitors and irreplaceable natural resources in our national parks by leaving them open but unstaffed.<sup>1</sup> These impacts are only going to get worse as the president continues to hold the country hostage over his unnecessary and wasteful wall.

Despite the shutdown, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is reportedly moving ahead with public meetings on the North Slope regarding oil and gas leasing in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Arctic Refuge) and opening millions more acres for oil and gas development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve).<sup>2</sup> Solicitation of public input is a legal requirement and an essential component of both of these efforts. Stakeholders and environmental advocates travel from across Alaska and the rest of the country to participate in these meetings, and clear lines of communication are necessary to facilitate a defensible public process. However, the shutdown has furloughed most agency staff, and Interior is reportedly not responding to public inquiries on the Reserve planning process. Notice that the Reserve meetings were still occurring was only provided to stakeholders the day before the first one was held, and information about the Arctic Refuge meetings is currently only available through news reports. Asking people to comment on two major development processes in the Arctic with huge potential environmental and human consequences without anyone in the agency able to answer questions defeats the purpose of the public participation process, and gives the strong impression that BLM is simply trying to check the boxes and end the comment periods as soon as possible, not engage in a meaningful dialogue with impacted communities or stakeholders. While the government shutdown continues, the responsible and fair course of action is to toll the comment period and reschedule the public meetings for a later date when BLM can respond to inquiries.

With DOI insisting on holding these hearings while so many other essential services remain shut down, I ask that you provide responses to the following by Friday, January 11:

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<sup>1</sup> Mitch Smith and Julie Turkowitz, *Shutdown Leaves Food, Medicine and Pay in Doubt in Indian Country*, NEW YORK TIMES (January 1, 2019); INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE, *The 2016 Indian Health Service and Tribal Health Care Facilities' Needs Assessment Report to Congress*, page 6; Darryl Fears and Juliet Eilperin, *Three Dead in National Parks as Shutdown Wears On*, WASHINGTON POST (January 4, 2019).

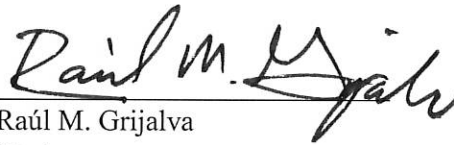
<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Harball, *Despite shutdown, Trump administration continues work to begin oil drilling in ANWR*, KTOO PUBLIC MEDIA (January 4, 2019).

1. What is the exact funding source that BLM is using to fund these meetings?
2. Provide a detailed accounting of how much money was available as of the beginning of the shutdown in the account BLM is using to hold these meetings, and how that funding is being spent during the shutdown.
3. Who participated in the decision-making process on proceeding with the public meetings, and who made the final decision to move forward?

While I understand that you are working with a reduced staff during the shutdown, since the decision to proceed with the hearings must have, by definition, been made by DOI employees deemed essential and still working during this time, there should be no difficulty having those employees provide responses to these questions in the requested timeframe.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact my staff at (202) 225-6065.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raúl M. Grijalva". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chairman  
Committee on Natural Resources

cc: Mr. Brian Steed, Deputy Director, Policy and Programs, Bureau of Land Management