

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2017

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our dismay about the proposed cuts to programs within the Department of the Interior in your proposed budget blueprint for fiscal year 2018. The overall \$1.5 billion cut, 12 percent below the annualized fiscal year 2017 level, would undercut your previous commitments to invest in our nation's infrastructure, particularly in areas where we had hoped to find common ground.

The blueprint's proposal to boost leasing and permitting for fossil fuel production, combined with your Administration's actions to roll back regulations that keep Americans safe and healthy and ensure a fair return to taxpayers, is deeply disappointing. In less than two months in office, your Administration has checked off an industry wish list of regulatory rollbacks.

- You signed a disapproval resolution repealing the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement's Stream Protection Rule, exposing more communities to toxic water and dead streams.
- The Department of Justice has asked the Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit to hold in abeyance the appeal of an injunction against the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) hydraulic fracturing rule, surrendering the federal responsibility to be good stewards of public land.
- White House officials have repeatedly confirmed your intention to end the BLM suspension of federal coal leasing, put in place a year ago pending a thorough review of the program, again signaling a return to old discredited ways of disposing of the public's mineral resources.
- The Office of Natural Resources Revenue illegally announced the suspension of its own regulation to improve royalty collection for oil, natural gas, and coal.

These actions fly in the face of commitments Secretary Zinke gave to the public in his confirmation hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee about securing a fair return to taxpayers. Secretary Zinke, responding to a question about cleaning up the mineral programs in response to criticisms from the Government Accountability Office and the Office of the Inspector General, said he was “very sensitive” to “making sure that our taxpayers get value.” That sensitivity appears dulled in this budget blueprint.

Moreover, the blueprint makes no mention of steps Congress has already taken to expedite the Interior Department’s permitting decisions, including passage of the Bureau of Land Management Permit Processing Improvement Act in 2014 and the creation of the Federal Permitting Improvement Council in the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act in 2015. These recent laws will already reduce the uncertainty and timelines associated with a range of energy and infrastructure projects.

This blueprint also directly undermines one of the nation’s greatest threats to infrastructure by cutting programs across the federal government that address global climate change and which would help the country prepare for impacts of that change. These impacts threaten infrastructure in communities across the country as well as our nation’s public lands.

The blueprint shortchanges the National Park Service, focusing solely on a maintenance backlog that consists largely of Department of Transportation-funded highway projects and reducing investments in other maintenance projects, while cutting the operational budget for those programs.

The blueprint also proposes slashing federal land acquisition funding under the Land and Water Conservation Fund by over 50 percent, putting it at the lowest inflation-adjusted level in over 40 years. Slashing investments in federal outdoor recreation infrastructure will hamper a rapidly growing part of the economy that generates \$646 billion in consumer spending and 6.1 million direct jobs.

The proposal to eliminate discretionary Abandoned Mine Land grants will endanger communities nationwide exposed to the continuing legacy of abandoned mines.

The proposed budget also undercuts our country’s obligations to Indian Country by cutting funding that is integral to meeting federal treaty, trust, and other legal obligations to tribes. The federal government’s past failures to meet these obligations have resulted in tribal governments losing billions of dollars in contract support costs critical to the operation of programs, crumbling infrastructure, and inadequate funding to meet social service and education needs in Indian Country. This is unacceptable.

The blueprint also suggests that essential science research conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey would cease, exposing communities and critical infrastructure nationwide to the rapidly evolving risks posed by climate change.

The blueprint proposes a stark decrease in funding for firefighting by proposing to return the budgets of the Federal firefighting agencies to the inept 10-year rolling average model for budgeting for wildfire suppression costs. This proposal would almost certainly result in the Forest Service having to return to borrowing funds from its other programs to pay for firefighting. Wildfires already pose a rapidly increasing risk to infrastructure. Forcing the Forest Service to take money away from its infrastructure programs to address fire mid-way through the summer is unacceptable, and this blueprint makes no attempt to suggest that your Administration will be proposing any long-term solutions to this perennial problem.

Taken together, your Administration's one-two punch of budget-slashing and regulation-trashing may satisfy some radically conservative factions but undermines the types of infrastructure investments we had hoped to support. Instead of pursuing these cuts to important programs, we urge you to work with us to make investments that directly fund infrastructure or provide a platform for infrastructure investments by the private sector, such as outdoor amenities.

Sincerely,

Maria Cantu

Edward J. Markey

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[Signature]

[Signature]

Dianne Feinstein

Rebecca Stivers

Al Franken

Mazie Hirono

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Ben Ray Lujan

Catherine Cortez Masto