

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

June 11, 2024

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I write to seek common ground on commonsense boundaries governing the rhetoric used in the immigration debate by Members of the Committee on Natural Resources (Committee). While we can disagree and debate the issues and potential solutions robustly, we have an obligation to do so without putting people in harm's way. The use of dangerous anti-immigrant falsehoods and conspiracies on the Committee has become commonplace. The normalization of this rhetoric has serious consequences for our Committee business and our democracy.

The immigration debate in Congress summons passionately held beliefs. Under such conditions, rhetorical flourishes can be expected. But when our speech is adopted by listeners and used to harass, intimidate, and threaten the well-being of entire groups of people, that speech can no longer be dismissed as mere rhetoric.¹ Our Members have a responsibility to avoid speech with a clear connection to acts of bigotry, intimidation, and violence.

A recent example is a letter that peddled falsehoods and distortions about a supposed "migrant crime wave" and used those false claims to stoke fears of "widespread lawlessness" and raise questions about a locality's engagement and cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Contrary to Republicans' anecdote-driven claims that migrants entering the U.S. are causing a surge in violent crimes, according to police data, there has been no surge of violence in crime in New York City going back to April 2022,² which is when Governor Greg Abbott began to use migrants as political props by putting them on buses and dropping them off in cities like New York. In fact, many major categories of crime — including rape, murder, and shootings — have decreased.³

The same is true nationwide. Claims of a nationwide migrant crime wave are not supported by national data. In fact, 2024 crime data show overall crime levels dropping in cities that have

¹ Daneil L. Byman, "How hateful rhetoric connects to real-world violence," *Brookings*, April 9, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/>

² Maria Cramer, "Migrant Crime Wave' Not Supported by Data, Despite High-Profile Cases," *New York Times*, February 15, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/nyregion/migrants-crime-nyc.html>

³ Olivia Sonnier, Garrett Hake, "Trump's claims of a migrant crime wave are not supported by national data," February 29, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trumps-claims-migrant-crime-wave-are-not-supported-national-data-rcna140896>

received the most migrants.⁴ Misleading claims, on the contrary, are dangerous to immigrant communities around the country.

During the February 8th Federal Lands subcommittee field hearing titled “Biden’s Border Crisis: The Consequences of Failing to Secure Federal Border Lands,” a Member of the Committee said that the human trafficking occurring across the southern border was being “facilitated” by local aid groups and that it was, “the greatest human trafficking effort, perhaps, in the history of the world since slavery.” Not only is the comparison to slavery deeply disrespectful to the descendants of enslaved persons, but this kind of language can also inspire rogue people in the country to harass or threaten employees of NGOs. In recent months, organizations such as Catholic Charities have seen or received disturbing, hateful, or threatening messages.⁵ People providing blankets, food, and shelter to human beings who are fleeing deep social, political, and economic hardship should not be treated as enemies.

Lastly, I am concerned with the repeated amplification of white nationalist rhetoric by Members of the Committee. During the full Committee hearing on September 27th, 2023, titled “Destroying America's Best Idea: Examining the Biden Administration’s Use of National Park Service Lands for Migrant Camps,” a Committee Member said, “I think that there are many situations ... where we could have prevented a catastrophic wildfire, for example, if we had not been held up by the NEPA process. But I think it’s worth highlighting the double standard that we’re seeing here in relation to the invasion on the southern border and the invasion of our cities.” During the October 18th, 2023, subcommittee hearing on H.R 5283, the *Protecting our Communities from Failure to Secure the Border Act of 2023*, a Committee Member said, “So, me and my team have been following, trying to help our locals... But the invasion is so huge; we need much more help from the federal government to curb this destruction of our public lands and our way of life up there.”

The language of an immigrant “invasion” is rhetoric that is inexorably tied to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory that has repeatedly been invoked by white nationalists and antisemites to justify violent acts of domestic terrorism.⁶ This includes the mass murders of dozens of Black Americans at a Tops Supermarket in Buffalo, New York; Jewish Americans at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Latino Americans at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, among other communities touched by tragedy.⁷ For example, the suspect in the Tree of Life shooting previously made posts on social media blaming a Jewish humanitarian group that supports refugees for helping bring “invaders” into the country. The El Paso suspect

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Aleja Hertzler-McCain, “Threats to Catholic Charities staffers rise amid far-right anti-migrant campaign,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 26, 2024. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/threats-catholic-charities-staffers-rise-amid-far-right-anti-migrant-campaign>

⁶ “Proponents of the ‘great replacement’ theory and the use of ‘invasion’ rhetoric, almost always paint a life-or-death scenario concerning the fate of ‘white America.’ The theory often coincides, directly or indirectly, with calls for violence.” *National Immigration Forum*, “The ‘Great Replacement’ Theory, Explained,” <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf>

⁷ Khaleda Raman, “‘Great Replacement Theory’ Has Inspired 4 Mass Shootings in Recent Years,” *Newsweek*, May 16, 2022. <https://www.newsweek.com/great-replacement-theory-inspired-terror-attacks-recent-years-1706953>

made similar posts online, saying the shooting was in response to an “Hispanic invasion of Texas.”⁸

As Chairman, you have a powerful opportunity to take a public stand against the deliberate amplification of rhetoric that has had deadly consequences in this country. I urge you to speak out against anti-immigrant falsehoods, denounce white nationalism and white supremacy, and end the use of related conspiracy theories, including the rhetoric associated with the “Great Replacement” theory, during Committee hearings and in all our work together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Raúl M. Grijalva". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'R' and 'G'.

Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources

⁸ Ibid.