

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

April 2, 2019

The Honorable Betty McCollum
Chair
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman McCollum and Ranking Member Joyce:

We write to request a \$2.5 million funding increase for the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) for FY2020. The funds would allow the OIG to meet the growing need to address oversight of grants, cybersecurity, and bureaus with troubling track records, as well as potential ethical lapses, conflicts of interest, waste, fraud, mismanagement, and abuse at DOI.

The OIG has received a two percent increase from FY2015 to FY2018. During that time, the number of complaints has increased by 48 percent. In FY2015, the OIG opened investigations on 14 percent of complaints received; in FY2018 that figure was only seven percent. The result is that the OIG is referring increasing numbers of hotline complaints to the Interior Department, where the investigation suffers from a loss of independence and transparency. Because of funding and staffing short falls, the OIG has been increasingly unable to take up investigation requests from Congress and from within DOI.

The OIG is currently unable to fully address areas of particular risk. DOI issues more than \$10 billion in contracts and financial assistance, an area at high risk for fraud and mismanagement. At current staffing levels, the OIG can audit less than one percent of the \$10 billion. Grants frequently come with less oversight than contracts, elevating the potential for waste, fraud and abuse even more. OIG needs more resources to help assure grants and other funds are being spent as intended.

Additional resources are also necessary to address ongoing issues at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). Every dollar lost to mismanagement or malfeasance is a dollar that does not go to education services for almost 42,000 Indian children in approximately 180 schools and dormitories. In addition, a 2017 review showed that BIA and BIE had more than 20,000 critical and high-risk cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

Former Secretary Ryan Zinke, one of the most scandal-prone cabinet members in history, left behind significant damage when he departed in January. While racking up nearly 20 investigations, at least four of which are ongoing, he conducted the widely-opposed and illegal rescission of national monuments, started the expansion of offshore drilling despite bipartisan opposition, launched an unprofessional Departmental reorganization without a plan or financial analysis, and accelerated already declining morale across the Department.

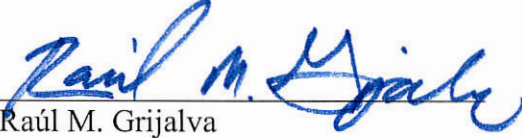
Acting Secretary David Bernhardt shows little signs of reducing the workload on the OIG; he and several other high-ranking DOI political appointees were formerly lobbyists for or employees of the industries they now regulate. The complicated financial interests and lack of previous public-sector experience characteristic of many serving in the Trump administration create a challenging environment for ethical watchdogs at DOI and across the executive branch.

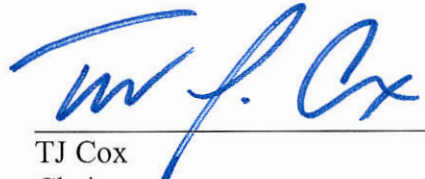
Adding to these challenges, Acting Secretary Bernhardt has proven to be adept at obstruction. Our committee has sent document and information requests to him and DOI to learn more about how major policy decisions are being made. Most of those have not resulted in any documents at all. Of the three occasions in which documents have been produced, two have been non-responsive. He has sent witnesses to hearings that are unqualified to sufficiently answer questions. The OIG report on reassignment of SES personnel documented some of the manipulation of records at his hands. Recent proposed changes to the way the Freedom of Information Act is implemented would have the effect of obstructing citizen investigations.

In this environment, a fully staffed and funded OIG is more crucial than ever. OIG staff are hard-working and dedicated to their mission, but they cannot perform their duties to the American people without adequate resources.

According to the Partnership for Public Service, the OIG has a 20:1 return on investment. An additional \$2.5 million will give the OIG 13 new FTEs to help keep up with the steadily increasing workload. As you face the difficult task of assembling a funding package for DOI for FY2020, we urge you to consider the generous returns in government efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency that would accompany a sufficient increase in funding for the OIG.

Sincerely,


Raúl M. Grijalva
Chairman
House Committee on Natural Resources


TJ Cox
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations