

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

January 10, 2018

Ms. Mary L. Kendall  
Deputy Inspector General  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Ms. Kendall,

I am writing to ask you to investigate the apparent cancellations by the Department of the Interior (DOI) of two ongoing studies being conducted by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NAS): one on the health impacts of mountaintop removal coal mining, and one on the offshore oil and gas inspection program. The rationales provided by the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) to explain why these studies were halted are questionable at best, and DOI has refused to respond to my multiple inquiries for additional information.

In August 2017, OSMRE halted work on a \$1 million public health study titled, *Potential Human Health Effects of Surface Coal Mining Operations in Central Appalachia*, for which \$600,000 had already been spent, ostensibly due to “the changing budget situation” that required a review of all grants and cooperative agreements in excess of \$100,000. There was no indication that any other grants or cooperative agreements were halted in a similar manner, however, even other ongoing NAS studies funded by DOI. Furthermore, since the study was obligated using FY 2016 money and OSMRE has 2-year funding, any re-obligation of the remaining \$400,000 on the cooperative agreement would have had to occur by September 30, 2017. I have sent two letters to Secretary Zinke, on August 25 and October 17, asking for more information about the decision to halt the study and the fate of the \$400,000; I have received no response to either letter.

Then on December 21, 2017, the NAS announced that BSEE had issued a stop-work order on a study titled *Review and Update of Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement Offshore Oil and Gas Operations Inspection Program*. In this case, a BSEE spokesperson stated, “the NAS study has been paused to allow BSEE time to determine if it duplicates efforts with the development of the risk-based component of our inspection program, which is taking place internally at BSEE.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the development of BSEE’s risk-based inspection program dates back to at least February 2011, when it was included in the FY 2012 budget justification for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement. Leaving aside the question of how long it should take to develop a risk-based inspection program, potential duplication was

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<sup>1</sup> M. Schleifstein, *Interior Department orders halt to study of agency overseeing offshore oil safety*, New Orleans Times-Picayune, December 21, 2017.

clearly not a concern when BSEE first requested the NAS study, although BSEE is now claiming that this requires halting work on the study and potentially cancelling it.

It does not appear that OSMRE or BSEE are being forthright when it comes to the reasons these studies were halted. It would be bad enough if these agencies halted these independent scientific studies because they raised politically uncomfortable issues for this Administration. But it is another issue entirely to waste hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on studies that will never be completed, and to refuse to account for the remaining \$400,000 on the mountaintop removal coal mining health study.

For these reasons, I respectfully request that your office open an investigation into the reasons that the two studies were halted and the fate of the \$400,000 remaining from the OSMRE study, and report the results to the Secretary, myself, and other appropriate Congressional committees.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijlava  
Ranking Member  
House Natural Resources Committee