

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

Washington, DC 20515

April 12, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

I am writing you to express my concerns about the process used to review qualifications and background information for political appointee positions at the Department of the Interior (DOI). Political appointees hold a number of highly important leadership positions at DOI, both at the department level and within the bureaus. The need to have persons of the highest aptitude, professionalism, and ethical grounding in these roles cannot be understated.

A recently published article¹ describes the social media content and past behavior of one of DOI's high-ranking officials, Kevin Sabo. Mr. Sabo was promoted to the political role of acting chief of the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs in the Bureau of Reclamation at the start of the Trump administration. As the article describes, Mr. Sabo has a history of posting social media material that promulgates conspiracy theories and incendiary speech from a public Facebook page which lists his official DOI job title. Most recently, Mr. Sabo directly compared the Parkland students to Nazis, saying, "The Nazis took everyone's guns away too. A lot of similarities with these kids."

Mr. Sabo is not alone in his social media transgressions. In late February, Christine Bauserman, a political appointee serving as one of your special assistants, resigned after conspiracy theories, anti-Muslim comments, and anti-LGBT sentiments were uncovered on her social media accounts.² These discoveries raise questions about the effectiveness of the process for vetting political appointees.

Government employees are free to express their personal views on social media, but posting content while representing oneself as a civil servant is cautioned against in agency policy³ and raises ethics questions, particularly for those in leadership positions. Further, publicly sharing

¹ Ollstein, Alice. "Interior Official Compared Parkland Students to Nazis, Promoted Conspiracies." *Talking Points Memo*, Talking Points Memo, 9 Apr. 2018, talkingpointsmemo.com/dc/interior-official-compared-parkland-students-to-nazis-promoted-conspiracies.

² Kacyzynski, Andrew and Chris Massie. "Political Appointee at Interior Resigns after KFile Inquiry into Birther, Anti-Muslim comments." *CNN Politics*, CNN, 28 Feb. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/02/28/politics/kfile-top-aide-to-ryan-zinke/index.html.

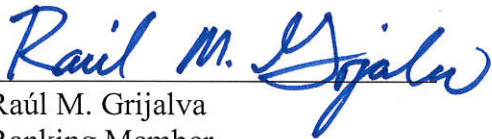
³ U.S. Department of the Interior. "Social Media Policy." Notices, 1 Dec. 2010, <https://edit.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/migrated/notices/upload/DOI-Social-Media-Policy-Final-Redacted.pdf>.

content that represents radical, hateful, or conspiratorial viewpoints degrades the American public's trust in their leaders' ability to make policies and decisions based on objective facts and science, not extremism and delusion.

While it is not possible to predict whether every potential appointee will exercise good judgment while working on behalf of the American people, a strong vetting process can often detect potential issues like this before they arise. To help us understand how these two incidents occurred, and to help us conduct oversight, please provide a detailed description of the vetting process at DOI for acting and permanent political appointees, including any review of relevant qualifications, background, and ethical considerations. For political appointees at the bureau level, please describe the vetting process that DOI conducts prior to the individual bureau's process.

Proper oversight of this issue is needed to help rebuild the public's trust that has been lost due to the inappropriate behavior of these individuals.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources