

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

February 1, 2017

The Honorable Benjamin Friedman
Acting Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1501 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington DC, 20230

Dear Administrator Friedman:

As Ranking Member of the House Committee on Natural Resources, I am writing to evaluate the impact of the recently announced hiring freeze on the agencies under the committee's jurisdiction.

On January 23, President Trump issued a memorandum that freezes civilian hiring across all executive agencies. Despite the fact that federal employment numbers are the lowest they have been in 54 years, the freeze prevents agencies from filling vacant positions and creating any new positions until the Office of Management and Budget designs and implements a plan to shrink the overall federal workforce. This is supposed to happen within 90 days but there is no way of knowing how long the freeze will remain in place.

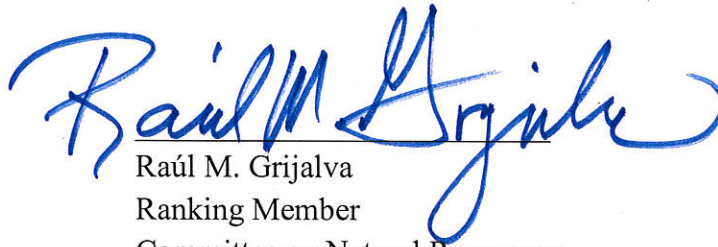
I am concerned that the President's desire to fulfill a campaign promise has eclipsed the importance of staffing agencies with critical resource management and public safety functions. This blanket hiring freeze ignores the fact that science and services produced by NOAA support billions of dollars of economic activity and hundreds of thousands of jobs. From weather forecasting to navigation to management of ocean resources, NOAA provides critical information to help farmers, shippers, fishermen, and related businesses do their jobs safely and efficiently. NOAA should be provided with everything it needs to continue providing this information and expand services - including the ability to hire staff - not used as a pawn to score political points.

So that I can better understand the true impact of this presidential memorandum, please provide answers to the following questions.

- How many positions are open across NOAA?
- Is NOAA able to fill positions left vacant by retiring or terminated staff? If not, how will this impact the agency's ability to meet statutorily defined obligations?
- The National Marine Fisheries Service and other NOAA lines rely heavily on contracts for fisheries catch observation, collection of recreational and commercial fishing data, regional ocean observations, and other services important to the economy, public safety, and the conservation of ocean and coastal resources. How will the hiring freeze impact NOAA's ability to let contracts in 2017?
- The memorandum prohibits agencies from filling vacant positions existing at noon on January 22, 2017. How does this restriction impact the transfer of current employees initiated before that date?
- Collection and timely analysis of fisheries data is critical to the livelihoods of commercial fishermen, recreational charter captains, and the thousands of businesses that support the fishing industry. How does this restriction impact NOAA's ability to collect data and produce fisheries stock assessments?
- Seafood fraud and Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing undercut honest American fishermen and hurt American consumers. Unfortunately, after years of budget cuts, NOAA's law enforcement capacity is severely limited. How does this restriction impact NOAA's ability to enforce laws that protect American fishermen and families?
- Collection and analysis of weather, climate, and hydrographic data is necessary to help businesses and communities facilitate commerce and mitigate the impacts of natural disasters. How will the hiring freeze impact NOAA's ability to provide these services to the public?
- Interagency consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) are critically important to ensure that federally-permitted projects can move forward and benefit the economy without harming protected species of fish and wildlife. However, NOAA's Southeast region alone has a backlog of hundreds of consultations because current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the region's workload. How does this restriction impact NOAA's ability to ensure sustainable economic development through compliance with Section 7 of the ESA?

Thank you for your assistance and cooperation in responding to this request. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Matt Strickler on the Natural Resources Committee staff at (202) 225-6065.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources