

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

February 3, 2025

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Westerman:

We write to request a hearing to get to the bottom of the unprecedented and illegal firing of the independent watchdogs at the Department of the Interior (DOI), the Department of Commerce (DoC), and the Department of Agriculture (USDA). We hope you can agree that erosion of the independence of the inspectors general (IG) hurts Democrats and Republicans alike and cannot be allowed to stand.

On Friday night January 24th, 2025, President Trump fired at least 18 IGs in an email that lacked the justification or the 30-day notice to Congress required by law.¹ The sweeping nature of the firings suggests an effort to replace independent watchdogs committed to a more effective and efficient government and rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse with those more inclined to protect the President and his cabinet regardless of their transgressions.

Two known exceptions to the firings raise further concerns. The Department of Homeland Security Inspector General, Joseph Cuffari, was spared by President Trump. He was found by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency in October 2024 to have “provid(ed) wrongfully inaccurate and misleading answers to questions regarding possible misconduct in his federal employment history” to Congress, “misrepresent(ed) his reasons for hiring a private law firm to investigate three former DHS OIG senior executives and his influence over that investigation,” spent \$1.4 million in taxpayer funds to pay a law firm to investigate three former senior members of his staff as retaliation against them, and tried to steer those investigations.² The investigation was silent on credible allegations of sexual harassment, document destruction, and a long list of other allegations unearthed by the Project on Government Oversight.³

¹ Alcindor, Y. Hillyard, V., and Strickler, L., *Trump fires 18 inspectors general overnight in legally murky move*. NBC News. January 26, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-fires-multiple-inspectors-general-legally-murky-overnight-move-rcna189261>

² *Report of Findings for Integrity Committee Case 20-059*. Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, Integrity Committee. October 2, 2024. <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2024-10-02-IC20-059-Letter-to-the-President-Redacted-w-Encls.pdf>

³ Machles, M., *Bad Watchdog Episode 1: The Missing Text Messages*. Project on Government Oversight. January 26, 2023. <https://www.pogo.org/podcasts/bad-watchdog/bad-watchdog-episode-1>

The second exception was Michael Horowitz, the Inspector General of the Department of Justice who issued a report finding that the Federal Bureau of Investigation made multiple missteps in its efforts to secure permission for wiretaps on a Trump campaign staffer during its investigation of the influence of Russia on Trump during the 2016 campaign. President Trump has lauded the report.⁴

The purge of inspectors general sends a clear signal to their successors that their job would be at risk if they issued findings that might upset the President or his followers. It would undermine the very purpose of independent inspectors general which were created as a response to President Nixon's historic Watergate scandal.

The recently fired DOI, DoC and USDA inspectors general were good at their jobs. Mark Greenblatt, the former Inspector General at DOI, oversaw the release of 261 audit, inspection, and evaluation reports and identified \$78.5 million in questioned costs in only 6 months, according to their latest semiannual report. These investigations yielded "\$161.8 million in investigative recoveries, 58 convictions, 55 personnel actions, and 67 procurement remedies."⁵ Phyllis Fong, the former Inspector General of the USDA oversaw audits that identified \$590 million in questioned costs. Their investigations resulted in 101 indictments, 59 convictions, and 164 arrests in just 6 months.⁶ Jill Baisinger, the former Acting Inspector General of the DoC led her team to \$18 million in criminal, civil, and administrative recoveries and referred 13 people to the Department of Justice for potential criminal prosecution in 6 months.⁷

The DOI Office of Inspector General (OIG) was essential during the first Trump administration when they issued multiple reports about the Secretaries of the Interior and other appointees, for example. In some cases, the DOI OIG found that allegations against political appointees lacked merit, effectively shielding them against smears. In other cases, allegations were confirmed. A partial list is instructive.

Former Secretary Ryan Zinke

- **Reassigning career employees:** Between June and October 2017, DOI stacked an advisory panel with political appointees who subsequently reassigned 27 members of DOI's Senior Executive Staff that Secretary Zinke and Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt opposed. At the time, no rationale for these reassignments was given. An attorney representing some of the reassigned employees claimed that nearly half of those reassigned were nonwhite. One of every three was Native American. DOI OIG found that stacking the panel with appointees

⁴ Messerly, M., Gerstein, J., Cheney, K., and Toosi, N. *Trump fires independent inspectors general in Friday night purge*. Politico. January 25, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/01/25/donald-trump-inspectors-general-firing-00200611>

⁵ *Semiannual Report to Congress for the Period Ending September 30, 2024*. Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of the Interior. October 2024. https://www.doioig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/FINAL_DOIOIG_SemiannualReportToCongress_October2024.pdf

⁶ *Semiannual Report to Congress, Second Half April 1, 2024 – September 30, 2024*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General. October 2024. https://usdaoig.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-11/SARC%2520FY%25202024%2520ND%2520HALF_508.pdf

⁷ *Semiannual Report to Congress for the period ending September 30, 2024*. Office of the Inspector General. <https://www.oig.doc.gov/wp-content/OIGPublications/SAR-2024-09.pdf>

violated guidance recommending a balance on the panel between career and political employees. It also found that the panel left no documentation explaining the reasons behind the selection of certain employees for reassignment, preventing the OIG from determining whether the law was broken. When the OIG asked appointees on the panel for their criteria for selecting who would be reassigned, the criteria given were demonstrably false. Over half of the reassigned employees believed they were reassigned for political, punitive, or retaliatory reasons or due to their area of work (e.g., conservation).⁸

- **Smothering the science:** In August and December 2017, DOI canceled two National Academy of Sciences studies, one on the health effects of mountaintop removal coal mining and one on the offshore oil and gas inspection program. Before its cancellation, a total of \$1 million had been obligated to the mountaintop removal mining study. Congressional Democrats requested the OIG to investigate the cancellation of the two studies.⁹ OIG found that DOI could not provide an adequate rationale for canceling the mountaintop removal mining study. The letter also showed that the \$450,000 spent on the study was wasted since no final product was produced.¹⁰
- **Using taxpayer money to do favors for friends:** In the fall of 2017, Secretary Zinke was reportedly using chartered flights for personal and/or political reasons. A particularly concerning example was his \$12,375 chartered flight from Las Vegas, NV, to Kalispell, MT, that appeared to have been scheduled to accommodate him being able to give a motivational speech to a professional hockey team owned by a former campaign donor. Committee Democrats requested that DOI OIG investigate multiple flights.¹¹ The final OIG report found that the \$12,375 flight was only approved because the ethics department was not given key information that would have resulted in a denial of approval for using taxpayer funding for the trip. The report confirmed that Secretary Zinke’s speech could have been rescheduled to accommodate a cheaper commercial flight and that DOI scheduled an “official” event in the area after the hockey team speech was planned. The implication is that DOI tried to figure out a way to make taxpayers pay for a \$12,375 trip that should have been funded by private interests. The report also found he gave untrue statements to federal investigators.¹²
- **Causing compounding investigations:** During the investigation into Secretary Zinke’s travel described above, the OIG uncovered additional information regarding his improper

⁸ Brown, Matthew, *Reassigned Interior Employees Blame Politics, Climate Work*, The Associated Press, April 12, 2018. <https://www.federaltimes.com/federal-oversight/watchdogs/2018/04/12/reassigned-interior-employees-blame-politics-climate-work/>

⁹ House Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, 2018. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Grijalva%20Letter%20to%20DOI%20Deputy%20IG%20Kendall%20on%20Canceled%20NAS%20Studies%20Jan.%202010%202018.pdf>

¹⁰ House Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, 2018. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/DOI%20IG%20Letter%20on%20Cancellation%20of%20NAS%20Mountaintop%20Removal%20Mining%20Study%20June%207%202018.pdf>

¹¹ House Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, October 20, 2017. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Grijalva%20McEachin%20Letter%20to%20OIG%20of%20Investigating%20Zinke%20Use%20of%20Taxpayer%20Funds%20for%20Travel%20Oct%202%202017.pdf>

¹² Office of the Inspector General, *Investigative Report on Secretary Zinke’s Use of Chartered and Military Aircraft Between March and September 2017, Report Number 17-1040*, Department of the Interior, April 15, 2018. https://www.doioig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/WebRedacted_ZinkeTravel_Public_041618.pdf

use of government vehicles and other resources. This information prompted a second travel-related investigation. The second report found that Secretary Zinke violated DOI policy by having his wife travel in government vehicles with him. He then repeatedly tried to make ethics officials approve her as an official DOI volunteer so she could travel with him at taxpayer expense. The report also found that Secretary Zinke deceived ethics officials into allowing two former campaign donors to take a taxpayer-funded boat trip to the Channel Islands in California. Secretary Zinke and his wife also insisted on taking a personal vacation to Turkey, which required a \$25,000 taxpayer-funded security detail.¹³

- **Secretary Zinke used his office to advance his brewery in a land deal in Whitefish, MT:** Reports and a committee review of internal emails and schedules indicate that Secretary Zinke met with his investment partners about a private land development deal in his official DOI office and may have tried to hide the meeting from the public. The land was being developed in Secretary Zinke's hometown of Whitefish, MT, and is adjacent to land owned by the Secretary. One of the development's primary funders was a top executive at Halliburton, a major oil-services company, which called into question whether the Secretary had disclosed this major conflict of interest and whether he had recused himself from DOI decisions that could enrich the Halliburton executive. Committee Democrats provided the email proving the meeting happened to the OIG.¹⁴ The investigation found Zinke was also using his personal email for official business, raising questions about what he was hiding from the public record. The OIG combined the evidence for improper use of personal email and the evidence that he used his office for self-enrichment into a package for the Department of Justice, which eventually declined to prosecute. This was reportedly the investigation that Trump was focused on when deciding whether to ask for Ryan Zinke's resignation.¹⁵
- **Trying to fire the Inspector General who was about to refer him to DOJ:** On October 12, 2018, Sec. Ben Carson at the Department of Housing and Urban Development sent an email to all employees indicating that his Assistant Secretary for Administration, Suzanne Israel Tufts, a political appointee, would be leaving the Department to become the Acting Inspector General at DOI. Tufts exhibited no experience in investigations or DOI issues. Then-Acting DOI Inspector General Mary Kendall had not been notified of this change. At the time of the announcement, Sec. Zinke was under at least four different investigations by the OIG. Committee Democrats asked the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency about whether they had vetted or recommended Suzanne Tufts for the position as

¹³ Office of the Inspector General, *Investigative Report of Alleged Abuse of Position by Secretary Zinke*, Report Number: I8-0192, Department of the Interior, October 22, 2018.

https://www.doioig.gov/sites/doioig.gov/files/WebRedacted_AllegedAbuseofPositionbyZinke.pdf

¹⁴ House Committee on Natural Resources, *Letter to Deputy Inspector General, U.S. Department of the Interior*, U.S. House of Representatives, June 21, 2018. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Grijalva%20Huffman%20McEachin%20IG%20Request%20on%20Zinke%20Ties%20to%20Halliburton%20June%2021%202018.pdf>

¹⁵ Eilperin, Juliette, Lisa Rein and Josh Dawsey, *Zinke Is the Cabinet Official Most Vulnerable to Democratic Probe, White House Fears*, Washington Post. November 9, 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/zinke-is-the-cabinet-official-most-vulnerable-to-democratic-probe-white-house-fears/2018/11/09/b9d3fd48-e368-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html

required by law.¹⁶ They had not. Later that day, DOI publicly denied that Tufts was being transferred to OIG. On October 30, 2018, CNN reported that one of the investigations into Secretary Zinke had been referred to the Department of Justice. After considerable backlash against Sec. Zinke for trying to push out an Inspector General for referring him to the DOJ, Tufts did not become the DOI Inspector General.

Former Secretary David Bernhardt

- **Accumulated multiple OIG investigations:** On April 15, 2019, Mary Kendall, the Acting DOI IG, told the Senate that Mr. Bernhardt was under seven separate investigations related to potential conflicts of interest during his time as Deputy Secretary under Zinke.
- **Refusing to cooperate with OIG investigations:** On May 19, 2022, the DOI OIG released a report about its investigation into whether Bernhardt “violated the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 before joining the DOI as Deputy Secretary in 2017” when he represented Westlands Water District at the lobbying firm that employed him before and after his time as DOI Secretary.¹⁷ The OIG was not able to make a determination because Bernhardt refused to be interviewed, as did several current and former congressional staff.
- **Refusing to cooperate with OIG investigations again:** On January 19, 2023, the DOI OIG issued a report in which they considered whether Bernhardt “violated the Ethics Pledge and Federal conflict of interest rules through his participation in matters involving the California Central Valley Project (CVP). The CVP is a major Federal water project under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Reclamation.”¹⁸ Once again, the OIG was not able to substantiate the allegations; he refused to be interviewed because the OIG refused to accept his procedural demands, which were not consistent with OIG policies and practices.
- **Failing to hold ethics violators accountable:** Bernhardt similarly refused to hold those under him accountable. Douglas Domenech, Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs, committed flagrant, repeated ethics violations. On May 29, 2020, the OIG released a report concluding that Mr. Domenech used his official position and taxpayer resources to promote family members for personal business and employment at the Environmental Protection Agency, thereby violating ethics regulations prohibiting the use of a public office for private gain.¹⁹ The report was the second finding in six months by the OIG that Mr. Domenech violated ethics regulations. The first report in December 2019 concluded that he improperly arranged meetings between his former employer and high-ranking DOI officials

¹⁶ House Committee on Natural Resources, *Letter to Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency*, U.S. House of Representatives, October 18, 2018. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Democratic%20Letter%20to%20Council%20of%20IGs%20on%20DOI%20OIG%20Replacement%20Oct.%202018%202018.pdf>

¹⁷ Office of Inspector General, *Former Secretary's Alleged Lobbying Disclosure Act Violation Before Joining the U.S. Department of the Interior as Deputy Secretary*, Report No. 20-0393, Department of the Interior, May 19, 2022. <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/DOI/WebRedactFormerSecretarysAllegedLDAViolation.pdf>

¹⁸ Office of the Inspector General, *Allegations of Ethics Violations by Former U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Were Not Substantiated*, Report Number: 19-0313, Department of the Interior, January 19, 2023. https://www.doioig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/WebRedacted_AllegationsofEthicsViolationsbyFormerDOISecretaryWereNotSubstantiated.pdf

¹⁹ Office of Inspector General, *Investigation into Alleged Ethics Misconduct by the Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs*, OIG Report No. 19-0497, Department of the Interior, May 29, 2020. Available at https://www.doioig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/WebRedacted_AllegedMisuseofPositionASIIA.pdf

to discuss an active lawsuit between DOI and the former employer.²⁰ Sec. Bernhardt refused to hold him accountable. According to a statement from DOI, the only consequence for Mr. Domenech's misconduct was additional ethics training on top of the repeated sessions that had already clearly warned him not to use his position to endorse friends and family, among other actions. The statement did not explain why more training would deter Mr. Domenech from using his public office and resources for private gain when training had failed to deter him thus far. The relevant ethics training took place before the violations described in both 2019 and 2020.

There is no reason to think that ethics challenges that require the careful attention of the OIG would abate under a second Trump administration. Early signs indicate the opposite.

Under effective independent leadership, the OIGs are better positioned than ever to protect taxpayer money. In 2022, Congress passed the Securing Inspector General Independence Act of 2022, which strengthened the OIG's hand against the kind of obstruction witnessed during the first Trump administration. I am proud to say that Natural Resources Committee Democrats have advocated for funding for the DOI OIG for several years - across Democratic and Republican administrations - because of their critical role in good governance and strong stewardship of taxpayer money.

Protecting the independence of the inspectors general has been a bipartisan priority since Congress created the positions. It is hard to imagine a more important time for the Natural Resources Committee to explore the impacts of the erosion of the inspectors general under the watchful eye of the American people in a hearing. I hope I can count on you to hold a hearing in the full committee exploring the implications of the firings for issues within our jurisdiction.

Sincerely,



Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee



Maxine Dexter
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations

²⁰ Office of Inspector General, *Investigative Report of Alleged Ethics Violation by the Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs*, OIG Report No. 19-0723, Department of the Interior, December 10, 2019, Available at https://www.doioig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/WebRedacted_AllegedEthicsViolationsASIIA.pdf