

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

February 26, 2020

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G St. NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

In December 2017, the Department of the Interior (DOI) issued guidance establishing a new process for approving discretionary grants and cooperative agreements. The guidance generally states that grants and cooperative agreements to certain categories of recipients, such as universities and public interest groups, must receive high-level scrutiny by political appointees within Interior prior to approval. The guidance further threatens retaliation against grant and cooperative agreement programs that do not comply, stating in bold type, “Instances circumventing the Secretarial priorities or the review process will cause greater scrutiny and will result in slowing down the approval process for all awards.”

Awards from DOI should be based on the merits to ensure the most productive use of taxpayer funding. We are concerned that this policy allows political appointees at the Department of the Interior to steer grant funds and cooperative agreements toward or away from certain recipients for reasons other than merit. For example, DOI ordered the National Academies of Sciences to halt a study on the health effects of mountaintop removal mining on local communities, the findings of which would have likely undermined the administration's goal of expanding domestic fossil fuel production.<sup>1</sup>

We are requesting that GAO examine Interior's grants and cooperative agreements review process, including

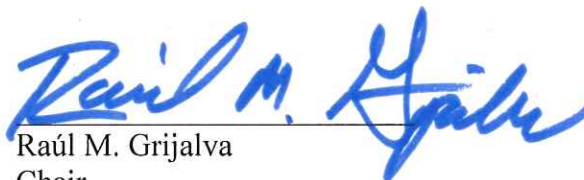
- a delineation of the overall grants and cooperative agreements approval process and what has changed;
- policies, procedures, and controls governing the grant and cooperative agreement process;
- trends in funding grants or cooperative agreement awards, including an analysis of grants and cooperative agreements that have been subject to this expanded level of review;
- impacts of changes to the grants and cooperative agreements process, including economic impacts and impacts of denying and delaying awards on jobs;
- whether grant and cooperative agreement funds have been redirected; and
- information on the timeliness of reviews and outcomes.

Thank you for your timely attention to this request. If you have any additional questions, please contact Jen Burks with Senator Hirono's office at [Jen\\_Burks@hirono.senate.gov](mailto:Jen_Burks@hirono.senate.gov) or Vic Edgerton with the House Natural Resources Committee at [Vic.Edgerton@mail.house.gov](mailto:Vic.Edgerton@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono  
U.S. Senator



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources

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<sup>i</sup> Washington Post, "Interior puts grants worth hundreds of millions of dollars through political review" (January 9, 2018), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interior-puts-grants-to-nonprofits-universities-through-political-appointee-review/2018/01/08/ec7140b2-f4bc-11e7-beb6-c8d48830c54d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interior-puts-grants-to-nonprofits-universities-through-political-appointee-review/2018/01/08/ec7140b2-f4bc-11e7-beb6-c8d48830c54d_story.html) (last visited February 4, 2020).