

February 27, 2025

The Honorable Douglas Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum:

The recent across-the-board firing of probationary employees at the Department of the Interior was done in haste, without foresight, and will do lasting damage to communities throughout our country. From Hawaii to Maine, our constituents are sounding the alarm on what these unjustifiable and short-sighted firings mean for our communities.

Public land managers play a unique role in protecting ecosystems that impact myriad community services. While these services may not be well known to the general public, in Hawaii they are crystal clear as a result of being an island state. Below are examples of how the recent probationary employee terminations within the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) significantly jeopardize our communities.

Hawaii has FWS wildlife refuges throughout our state. On Kauai, all FWS field staff were terminated. One of the individuals was responsible for controlling water flow for taro farms, which are prime habitat for endangered birds. Kauai produces the majority of taro and making this position vacant could severely impact Hawaii's taro production which is valued at over \$6 million as of 2021, and force us to become even more dependent on foreign imports of food.

On Hawaii Island and Oahu, half of the field staff and a quarter of total staff were terminated. Positions lost include a plant restoration team that was tasked with collecting native seed and propagating native plants for federal land managers throughout Hawaii to utilize for fire suppression and recovery efforts. Nonnative grasses significantly contribute to wildfire fuels loads in Hawaii and are often the first to establish on recently burned lands, so these native plants are critical to breaking the fuel cycle. Another position that was lost was responsible for maintaining fences to keep invasive ungulates out of the refuge. Just one pig breaking through the fence can undo decades of restoration efforts in a matter of days, wasting an immense amount of taxpayer dollars. Additionally, Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge is home to the headwaters for the vast majority of fresh water streams that provide drinking water to the

windward side of Hawaii Island. Failure to maintain forest health within the Refuge would significantly impact the quantity and quality of drinking water for our families.

Additional FWS staff lost in the state include an individual responsible for preventing the introduction of brown tree snakes to Hawaii from Guam. It is estimated that if introduced to Hawaii, brown tree snakes could cause \$1.7 billion worth of damage to Hawaii each year. The termination of this position jeopardizes the millions of taxpayer dollars that have been invested over decades to keep the brown tree snake out of Hawaii.

I urge you to reinstate these Fish and Wildlife Service employees who perform critical work to protect Hawaii's environment and economy. Clearly these firings are taking place throughout our agencies and thousands of people are being fired. The harm these firings are having on programs we rely on is obvious. I urge you to stand up for your agency, your workers, and your mission. The costs of not doing so will far exceed any savings resulting from the termination of these positions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mazie K. Hirono". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator