



Society of Environmental Journalists

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February 19, 2021

Rep. Debra Haaland
1421 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Secretary-Designate Haaland,

Congratulations on your nomination as Secretary of the Interior. We look forward to learning more about your plans and priorities for carrying out the department's important mission.

The Society of Environmental Journalists is a professional association of some 1,500 members, most of whom are journalists. Over SEJ's 31-year history, its members have covered Interior Department agencies through multiple administrations.

During some of those years, there has been a healthy flow of information about what Interior is doing. In the last four years, though, the Interior press operation often echoed President Trump's antagonism against the media as an "enemy." It acted to restrict journalists' access to information and agency scientists, politicizing to an unprecedented degree what the public has a right to know about the management on its behalf of public lands and resources.

We are calling on President Biden and you as Secretary-designate to commit the agency to restoring government openness and transparency, and to respect the vital role that journalists play in our democracy. To that end, we provide these recommendations for letting the sun shine more fully in the Department of the Interior:

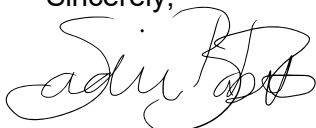
- Restore civility, professionalism, openness and truthfulness to Interior media operations.
- Rescind policies and directives, such as the one issued in 2018 to the [U.S. Geological Survey](#), requiring DOI scientists to get prior approval from politically appointed public affairs staff for interviews with national and often even regional news outlets. Declare that federal employees, especially scientists, are not only permitted but encouraged to talk directly to reporters without "minders" or press office permission. Requiring press office approval of every interview or query too often leaves journalists on deadline with incomplete or misleading understanding of agency actions.
- Ensure fairness in media access to DOI information. The press offices should not filter media access according to news outlets' size, platform, status, or ideology. This should include advisories and mailing lists.
- Respond promptly and as forthrightly as possible to media inquiries. Respect deadlines. Provide all relevant information, even that which

doesn't necessarily support the agency's policy or stance, so journalists and the public may understand the complexities of issues.

- Presume that interactions between journalists and PIOs are on the record by default. Rules of attribution (e.g. "background") should not apply unless and until both parties agree.
- Avoid vague, anonymous emails and desk statements. Do not require questions to be always by email. Please take our phone calls and comment on the record even if it's a "we need to check on that and get back to you." Do not try to limit subjects of inquiry (you can always decline comment). Publish lists of headquarters and agency press officers with subject expertise and listed contacts. Better yet, provide full-agency staff directories, including phone numbers and email addresses.
- Hold open press briefings on significant policy rollouts and regulatory actions. Invite all regular beat reporters to in-person briefings held at Interior headquarters or other offices; provide web conferencing and teleconference access for all interested reporters when the agency action or policy has regional or nationwide scope.
- Reinstate the practice of publishing and distributing a weekly list of the Secretary's scheduled public appearances, so reporters may plan coverage of those that seem newsworthy. Do the same with other top agency leaders.
- Resume the practice of publishing up-to-date calendars of all the Secretary's and agency heads' meetings – not just public events — with staff, stakeholders, elected officials and other individuals and groups from outside the agency.
- Review and revise the agency's Freedom of Information Act regulations to ensure that Interior agencies adhere to the letter and spirit of the law. The previous administration's [changes to the rules](#) had the opposite effect. The Trump DOI also started an "awareness review" by political appointees which interfered with disclosure of politically sensitive information. Rescind that review and depoliticize FOIA responses.
- Reorganize FOIA administration structure and procedures to put FOIA responses in the hands of trained career professionals. It should give more autonomy to bureaus and the hierarchy of regional, state, and local offices closest to the resources DOI administers.
- Ensure adequate funding and staffing to clear the backlog of FOIA records requests.
- Rescind all guidances or directives that seek to restrict FOIA releases from DOI agencies, including the September 2018 Fish and Wildlife Service [directive](#) titled "Guidance for Applying Deliberative Process Privilege in Processing Ecological Services FOIA Requests."

For the sake of our democracy and the people's right to know how their resources are being managed, it's time for Interior to help restore government transparency and accountability. We urge you to renew the agency's commitment to the mission of informing the public about what the government is doing to address risks to human health and the environment.

Sincerely,



Sadie Babits, President
Society of Environmental Journalists

cc: Tyler Cherry, Press Secretary
Melissa Schwartz, Communications Director
Jennifer Van der Heide, Chief of Staff
Robert Anderson, Principal Deputy Solicitor