

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 20, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We strongly oppose the Department of the Interior's draft Environmental Assessment (EA) that proposes to revoke Public Land Order (PLO) No. 7923, which established the 10-mile mineral withdrawal area surrounding the Chaco Culture National Historical Park (CCNHP). The Department's current fast-tracked efforts to overturn the withdrawal area do not respect the historical, cultural, and spiritual value of Chaco Canyon.

For over 1000 years, Tribes across the Southwest have gathered at Chaco Canyon for ceremonial and cultural activities, which continue to this day. Chaco Canyon is not just a historical site; it's a living cultural landscape. The cultural significance of Chaco Canyon earned the site a UNESCO World Heritage designation, one of only twenty-seven within the United States. However, oil and gas development on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land surrounding CCNHP has threatened the fragile landscape.

In May 2019, after years of advocacy from Tribal nations and recognition of the potential harm extractive industries posed to CCNHP, former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt agreed to a one-year moratorium on oil and gas leasing within a 10-mile buffer zone surrounding the park. Former Interior Secretary Deb Haaland then initiated a process for a 20-year federal mineral withdrawal within the 10-mile buffer zone in January 2022. An archaeological study found over 4,730 cultural sites within the 10-mile withdrawal area. On June 7, 2023, Secretary Haaland finalized PLO No. 7923 after 150 days of public comment periods and eight public meetings. Protections for Chaco Canyon have also received bipartisan support in Congress, including House passage of H.R. 2181, the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act, in October 2019, and the enactment of appropriations riders to restrict oil and gas lease sales in the area.

Unfortunately, the Department has failed to live up to the same standards in its current environmental and historic preservation review process to overturn PLO No. 7923. On July 15, 2026, the Department published its draft EA that proposed to completely revoke the withdrawal area and reopen the BLM land surrounding CCNHP to both oil and gas leasing as well as locatable mineral exploration and development. The Department held only 21 days of public comment periods and zero public meetings during its review process. Even with such limited comment periods, it is estimated that the public submitted over 300,000 comments within the 21 days. Moreover, the Department's rushed review undermined the Department's trust responsibility to Tribal nations and the Tribal consultation process under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

On June 12, 2025, shortly after the BLM informed Tribes that the bureau was considering changes to PLO No. 7923, you appeared before the Natural Resources Committee. During the hearing, you committed to send an official with decision-making authority to conduct in-person, individual Tribal consultation with each Tribe that has an interest in Chaco Canyon. According to the draft EA published on July 15, 2026, the Department failed to conduct all Tribal consultation meetings before issuing the proposed action. Multiple Tribes received only

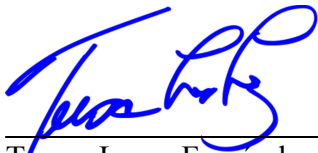
“informational meetings” while Tribal consultation requests for a meeting with a decision-maker remained unmet. The draft EA makes no mention of whether a decision-maker attended any of the Tribal consultation meetings.

As the Department reviews the public comments to the draft EA proposing the revocation of PLO No. 7923, we request that you provide answers to the following questions by Friday, August 28, 2026:

1. How many Tribal consultation meetings on the revocation of PLO No. 7923 included a Departmental official with decision-making authority?
2. If a Tribe requested a decision-maker to attend a consultation meeting, why did the Department not honor the request per Secretary Burgum’s commitment before the Natural Resources Committee on June 12, 2025?
3. Why was the Department unable to complete Tribal consultation meetings on the revocation of PLO No. 7923 before publishing the draft EA on July 15, 2026?
4. Will the Department complete all requested Tribal consultation meetings with a decision-maker before completing its current National Environmental Policy Act review of PLO No. 7923?
5. The draft EA’s proposed action includes reopening the mineral withdrawal area to exploration and development of locatable minerals. What factors led the Department to conduct an Environmental Assessment rather than an Environmental Impact Statement for this proposed action?

We look forward to your responses.

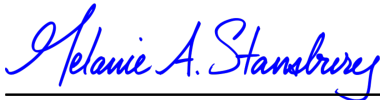
Sincerely,



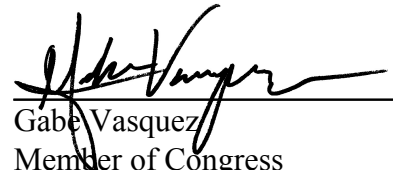
Teresa Leger Fernandez
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Subcommittee
on Indian and Insular Affairs



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on
Natural Resources



Melanie Stansbury
Member of Congress



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress



Sharice L. Davids
Member of Congress



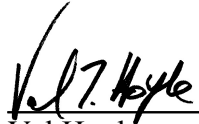
Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



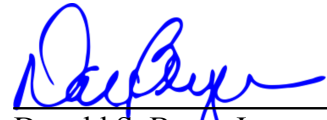
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



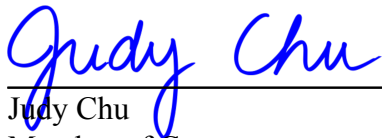
Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



Val Hoyle
Member of Congress



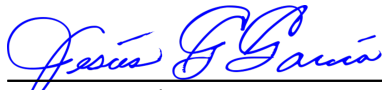
Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress



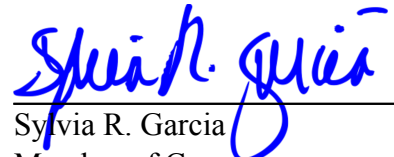
Judy Chu
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



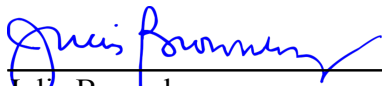
Sylvia R. Garcia
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Rashida Tlaib
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Julia Brownley
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Raja Krishnamoorthi
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