



March 21, 2023

Chairman Bruce Westerman  
U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Westerman:

We would like to call your attention to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland's conflicts of interest and request the House Committee on Natural Resources investigate her actions to determine if she has misused her official position and violated ethics guidelines. Secretary Haaland's conflicts involve her daughter's ties to a violent climate protest that targeted the Department of the Interior (DOI) and her lobbying activities related to halting federal oil and natural gas leasing in the Willow Project area of Alaska and the area surrounding the Chaco Culture Historical National Park (CCHNP) in New Mexico.

Since 2020, Somah Haaland has worked as a paid organizer for the Pueblo Action Alliance (PAA), a New Mexico-based environmental and social justice group.<sup>1</sup> PAA and other coalition partners organized a violent climate protest at Interior headquarters on October 14, 2021,<sup>2</sup> with the aim of pressuring Interior to stop oil and natural gas leasing on tribal and federal lands.<sup>3</sup> According to documents obtained from Interior officials by government watchdog Protect the Public's Trust, Secretary Haaland's staff collaborated directly with the organizers despite knowing the protest would not be peaceful.<sup>4</sup> Fifty-five protesters were arrested and several police officers were injured, including one who was sent to the hospital.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly two months prior, PAA met directly with Secretary Haaland in Washington, D.C. According to PAA Executive Director Julia Bernal, it was a special experience and it was "good to see our Auntie Deb, you know she's from the Laguna Pueblo and a lot of our staff are actually family." The goal of the meeting was to share with the secretary the group's opposition to federal oil and natural gas leasing and discuss water policies.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2022, news reports reveal Secretary Haaland's daughter was a key part of a campaign to lobby Democratic lawmakers in Congress on Interior's policies for which her mother is the sole decision maker.<sup>7</sup> Somah joined a coalition of climate groups, which included PAA, that urged lawmakers to

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<sup>1</sup> "[Somáh Haaland: 'We Have a Lot to Say'](#)," *American Theater*, Kate Mazade, July 6, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "[Our Coalition](#)," People vs Fossil Fuels, January 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "[Interior secretary's daughter member of group that participated in violent protest at Interior headquarters](#)," *Fox News*, Thomas Catenacci, February 3, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> "['Friendly' or 'Not Friendly'; Did Interior Leadership Downplay Threat by Climate Protesters Leading up to Violent Altercation at HQ?](#)" Protect the Public's Trust, January 30, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> "[New Mexico group opposing federal energy leases employs Biden cabinet member's daughter](#)," *The Center Square*, Tom Joyce, February 28, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> "[Water Back & the Pueblo Action Alliance](#)," Page Buono and Collin Haffey, *Hot & Dry* podcast, September 13, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "[Biden Cabinet member's daughter lobbying Congress on issue her mom has final say on: 'Conflict of interest'](#)," *Fox News*, Thomas Catenacci, December 20, 2022.

support Interior’s proposed withdrawal of lands surrounding the CCHNP from federal oil and natural gas leasing.

Targets of Somah’s December lobbying trip also included DOI officials.<sup>8</sup> Her group organized the premier showing of a documentary film she narrated featuring Secretary Haaland entitled, “*Our Story: The Indigenous Led Fight to Protect Greater Chaco*.” According to organizers, unnamed Interior officials attended the exclusive meeting alongside climate activists and special guests Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez (NM-03).<sup>9</sup> Somah Haaland is personally profiting from the film and in turn, cashing in on her familial relationship with the Interior Secretary.

Following Haaland’s lobbying trip, the Democratic majority in Congress included a carveout in the year-end omnibus spending bill that has the same effect as the secretary’s anticipated withdrawal around CCHNP. The carveout was advanced despite opposition from the Navajo Nation and numerous tribal members.<sup>10</sup>

Secretary Haaland also has a conflict of interest regarding the withdrawal decision as a member of the Laguna Pueblo, one of several Puebloan nations that has advocated for the ten-mile withdrawal around CCHNP. The Puebloan nations are hundreds of miles away from CCHNP, although they do have valid cultural ties to the park. On the other hand, the Navajo Nation, whose lands are in proximity to the park and whose members are directly affected by the withdrawal, has officially taken a position opposed to the ten-mile buffer. Instead, the Navajo Nation offered a very fair compromise of a five-mile buffer to address the desires of the Puebloan Nations for greater protection of Chaco cultural resources while still enabling their Navajo Nation members to develop most of the oil and natural gas resources they own surrounding the park. The Interior Department did not even consider the Navajo Nation’s compromise as one of the alternatives in the Environmental Assessment that will inform the Secretary’s withdrawal decision. The EA did not include adequate consideration of the fact that about 5,500 Navajo Nation members will lose \$194 million of their livelihoods over the 20-year period of the withdrawal.<sup>11</sup>

Most recently, PAA has actively petitioned Secretary Haaland to oppose the Willow Project in Alaska.<sup>12</sup> The group’s actions include direct activism through letters addressed to the secretary. PAA has also been actively engaged through opaque actions, most notably as a steering committee member of People vs Fossil Fuels, which aggressively opposed the Willow Project.<sup>13</sup> When asked by media about the clear conflict of interest created by Somah’s involvement in PAA and its actions, DOI spokesperson Melissa Schwartz denied that any conflict existed.<sup>14</sup> This project is nearly 3,000 miles away from New Mexico, which indicates that PAA it is not limiting its lobbying to localized issue issues, but rather it is involved in a host of policies across the country.<sup>15</sup>

Based on these events, several questions arise about Secretary Haaland’s impartiality inside the agency when it comes to supporting her daughter, PAA, and associated climate groups. The following are questions that ought to be asked of Secretary Haaland and other Interior officials.

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<sup>8</sup> “[Greater Chaco advocates travel from New Mexico to call on congress for environmental justice for Greater Chaco](#),” WildEarth Guardians, December 25, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “[Navajo Nation opposes withdrawal for development at Chaco Canyon](#),” *The Gallup Sun*, Alray Nelson, November 25, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> [Letter on the Proposed Chaco Area Withdrawal Environmental Assessment](#), Western Energy Alliance, December 9, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> [Coalition letter to Interior Sec. Deb Haaland](#), Pueblo Action Alliance, et al, January 11, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> “[People vs Fossil Fuels Coalition Condemns Biden Administration’s Approval of the Willow Oil Drilling Project](#),” People vs Fossil Fuels, March 13, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> “[TikTok push targets Biden on Alaska’s huge Willow oil plan](#),” *Associated Press*, Matthew Brown, March 8, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> “[Twitter @Tim400000](#),” Tim400000, January 20, 2023.

In relation to the violent protest:

- Has Secretary Haaland formally disclosed to ethics officials at Interior her family's connection to PAA and other activist groups?
- What communications took place behind-the-scenes between Secretary Haaland and her daughter regarding protester's policy demands?
- Did Secretary Haaland learn about the protest in advance from her daughter or from the prior meeting with PAA? Did she intercede to help grant access to the agency's headquarters? Did she try to prevent the protest?
- Was Somah's name redacted from open records documents released by the agency to protect the secretary?

Regarding Somah Haaland's lobbying:

- What conversations occurred between Secretary Haaland and Somah leading up to the coalition's trip to lobby lawmakers?
- Did Secretary Haaland or agency officials intercede with lawmakers to help arrange meetings with Somah and members of her coalition?
- What influence did Somah have with lawmakers' regarding the special legislative carveout related to the CCHNP withdrawal?
- What actions have ethics officials at Interior taken to review Secretary Haaland's conflicts of interest to ensure special access and favors aren't being granted to her daughter or her allies?

Regarding the failure to consider Navajo Nation interests in the withdrawal:

- Why didn't the Bureau of Land Management include the Navajo Nation's proposed five-mile buffer compromise as an alternative in the Environmental Assessment (EA)?
- Will the Interior Secretary require BLM to add the Navajo Nation's compromise as an alternative in another round of public comment on the EA before she makes a decision?
- Is Secretary Haaland's membership in the Laguna Pueblo clouding her objectivity with respect to considering all tribal interests in the decision on the Chaco withdrawal?
- How does taking \$194 million in royalty payments away from Navajo Nation members further the goals of environmental justice and ensure that historically disadvantaged communities are involved in decision-making processes?

Thank you for considering oversight of the secretary's connections to her daughter's activities and lobbying and her conflicts of interest related to the decision on CCNHP and other oil and natural gas issues.

Sincerely,



Kathleen M. Sgamma  
President