



OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

AUG 03 2020

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Connolly,

This is in response to your letter of June 15, 2020, in which you request that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) examine the plans and procedures of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) for returning employees to Federal offices in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic

I share your concerns that the safety and wellbeing of DOI employees—as well as contractors and visitors to DOI's thousands of facilities across the country—is of the utmost importance. Immediately upon the passage of the CARES Act, my office began strategic planning and deploying resources to oversee the Department's response to the pandemic. As reflected in this [oversight plan](#), we are planning to review a wide array of the Department's pandemic-related activities. I am proud to report that we have already issued 10 products on a variety of the Department's activities related to the pandemic, including:

- Lessons Learned for CARES Act Awards
- Where's the Money? DOI Use of CARES Act Funds
- Lessons Learned for Indian Country
- Top Management Challenges - Pandemic Response
- Management Advisory - Recommendations for Reimbursing Contractors' Paid Leave Under the CARES Act

As part of that pandemic oversight, we have already issued or are in the process of examining the Department's efforts that relate directly to the concerns you raised. For instance, our report documenting the Department's Top Management Challenges related to the pandemic specifically highlighted the importance of accounting for employee safety as one of the three broad issues the Department must confront as it works to achieve its mission during the pandemic. Under the section entitled "Balancing public and employee safety with access to public lands," our report noted that:

The Department faces a tension between balancing access to public lands with protecting public safety and resources. Facilitating access to public lands could jeopardize the health and safety of the public and DOI employees due to active COVID-19 transmission. Conversely, reducing active DOI employee presence on public lands while still allowing public access could help protect employee safety, but runs the risk of jeopardizing the land and resources themselves.

Our report stated further:

Allowing public use while restricting employee monitoring to maintain employee safety could lead to similar resource protection and maintenance challenges as we saw in the 2019 Government shutdown. Difficulty obtaining protective supplies (e.g., personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer) as a prerequisite to returning employees to monitoring and enforcement roles on public lands and resources would exacerbate this challenge.

In addition, we recently issued a report entitled “[The National Park Service's Coronavirus Response Operating Plans](#)” that reported on each national park’s operating status, anticipated reopening date, and whether the park had begun developing a COVID-19 response operating plan. In that report, we acknowledged the challenge the NPS faces in this ever-changing and unprecedented situation, as well as the fact that the NPS cannot take a one-size-fits all approach to reopening all its locations. To the contrary, we noted that each national park must consider guidance from Federal, State, and local officials. Considering the risks associated with COVID-19 and the phased reopening of national parks, we found that it is imperative that all NPS locations have a park-specific plan to operate in a way that provides public access while protecting visitors and staff from further transmission of the virus.

A third report that relates to the issues you raised is our recent review of the Department’s activities on [Wildland Fire Management](#) (WFM). In that report, we noted the status of the Department’s spending that affected Department firefighters, saying:

The Office of the Secretary made part of its \$157.4 million of CARES Act funds available for the WFM program. To date, the DOI has approved funding for temporary firefighting facilities needed to maintain social distancing and quarantine protocol; PPE, such as masks, gloves, sanitizers, and thermometers; additional labor costs for operations and program management during the pandemic; and cleaning services and sanitation of facilities and vehicles. As of June 19, 2020, the WFM program has obligated \$547,596 (or 5 percent) and spent \$381,431 (or 3 percent) of the \$11.3 million of approved funds.

With regard to expenses related to keeping those Department firefighters safe, our report identifies that:

...the DOI created a special interagency team of medical and public health experts to review and synthesize COVID-19 guidelines used in wildfire operations. The team directs firefighters to follow the recommendations provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which state that extra precautions should be taken to protect firefighters and other personnel at fire camps from COVID-19. Fire camps are like small communities in many ways. For example, fire camps can include thousands of people living together and working collectively to respond to a wildfire, often in remote areas. Therefore, the CDC’s guidance for wildland firefighters recommends using screening programs, disinfectants, quarantine periods, and personal protective equipment (PPE) when appropriate—all of which could lead to more requests for funding as the fire season progresses.

Beyond the reports that we have already issued, we have two ongoing reviews that examine the issues that you raised in your letter. First, we are assessing how the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) is handling offshore inspections in the face of COVID-19. In particular, BSEE employees are conducting critical safety testing in remote offshore locations—at times in confined spaces—and we are evaluating BSEE's COVID-19 response operating plans for performing such inspections.

Second, my office has also initiated a review of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Tribes' responses to COVID-19 cases in the Indian detention system to identify common challenges and potentially successful practices. The team will be examining the rates of inmates and staff who have been tested and have tested positive, availability of testing and PPE, implementation of social distancing and sanitizing measures, and the impact of long-standing challenges such as overcrowding and under staffing.

We expect that these two reports will be released later this summer or early autumn.

As you can see, we share your concern about the impact of the pandemic on the Department's employees, contractors, visitors to DOI's facilities, and others in its jurisdiction (such as inmates in tribal detention facilities). We will continue our oversight efforts as DOI opens facilities and lands for employees, contractors, and citizens. In addition to these evaluative reviews, our investigative offices are diligently monitoring the hotline for complaints from employees. Given the geographically disperse functions of DOI, our hotline represents a safe way for employees to confidentially report issues.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 202-208-5745, or your staff may contact Nancy DiPaolo, Director, External Affairs at 202-208-4357.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Lee Greenblatt', written in a cursive style.

Mark Lee Greenblatt
Inspector General