

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 5, 2020

Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of the Trump administration's evaluation and approval of fossil fuel and renewable energy projects. We are particularly concerned that there is "a double standard at play" in which fossil fuel projects are expedited while renewable energy projects are delayed.<sup>1</sup>

The Trump administration has sought in numerous ways to conduct expedited environmental reviews for fossil fuel infrastructure and other extractive industries. Most recently, the administration has announced a proposal to "reform" the scope and duration of evaluations under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).<sup>2 3</sup> These efforts followed other administration actions to expedite environmental reviews for fossil fuel projects, such as the efforts to compress the review process for opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil and gas drilling to one year when, "normally, such impact statements for ecologically sensitive and undeveloped land would take at least two to three years."<sup>4</sup> These administration efforts, if successful, will speed up approval of new fossil fuel infrastructure projects at the expense of the environment and public health of frontline communities.<sup>5 6</sup>

At the same time, the Trump administration appears to be seeking delays of renewable energy projects. Despite seeking expedited environmental reviews for numerous fossil fuel infrastructure projects, Trump administration officials in the Department of the Interior have

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<sup>1</sup> Inside Climate News, "Government Delays First Big U.S. Offshore Wind Farm. Is a Double Standard at Play?," Phil McKenna and Dan Gearino, August 19, 2019, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/19082019/vineyard-wind-offshore-renewable-energy-delay-boem-environmental-cumulative-review-nepa-massachusetts>.

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, "Trump's Move Against Landmark Environmental Law Caps a Relentless Agenda," Lisa Friedman, January 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/climate/trump-nepa-environment.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Pacific Standard, "How Trump Plans to Gut NEPA, A 50-Year-Old Environmental Law," Sharon Zhang, January 24, 2019, <https://psmag.com/environment/how-trump-plans-to-gut-nepa-environment>.

<sup>4</sup> POLITICO, "How Science Got Trampled in the Rush to Drill in the Arctic," Adam Federman, July 26, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/trump-science-alaska-drilling-rush/>.

<sup>5</sup> Washington Post, "Trump proposes change to environmental rules to speed up highway projects, pipelines, and more," Juliet Eilperin and Brady Dennis, January 9, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/white-house-wants-to-change-rules-to-speed-up-highway-projects-pipelines-drilling/2020/01/08/4e248fda-325a-11ea-9313-6c8a89b1b9fb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/white-house-wants-to-change-rules-to-speed-up-highway-projects-pipelines-drilling/2020/01/08/4e248fda-325a-11ea-9313-6c8a89b1b9fb_story.html).

<sup>6</sup> The Hill, "Critics warn Trump's latest environmental rollback could hit minorities, poor hardest," Rebecca Beitsch, January 12, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/477798-critics-warn-trumps-latest-environmental-rollback-could-hit>.

ordered a sweeping environmental review of the burgeoning offshore wind industry, a move that threatens to stall or even derail this growing industry, and “raises a host of questions for future developments.”<sup>7</sup> Reports have also contrasted the administration’s delays of the wind projects, “with the Republican administration’s moves to open up offshore and Arctic areas to oil and gas development, despite strong environmental concerns.”<sup>8</sup> Several utility scale offshore wind projects have been proposed for the east coast.<sup>9</sup> Unnecessary delays of these project would be particularly troubling because the initial approval process for offshore wind “is helping to set expectations about how long and how expensive that process will be for other projects,”<sup>10</sup>

While we appreciate the importance of cumulative impact analyses for environmental reviews and studies and oppose the Trump administration’s attempts to weaken environmental review processes, it would be troubling if the Trump administration is employing a double standard for environmental analysis that favors the fossil fuel industry.

Conflicts of interest may play a key role in this differential treatment. Senior officials of the Trump administration maintain strong ties to the fossil fuel industries, particularly in the agencies responsible for overseeing energy and environmental regulations.<sup>11</sup> Reports show that, “Under the Trump administration, the people appointed to [positions with vast power over the protection of air and water] overwhelmingly used to work in the fossil fuel, chemical and agriculture industries.”<sup>12</sup> These Trump administration officials overseeing environmental and energy regulations have, “often targeted environmental rules it sees as burdensome to the fossil fuel industry and other big businesses.”<sup>13</sup> Among senior Trump administration officials, it also appears that these strong ties continue even after leaving government service.<sup>14</sup>

As the federal government continues to delay the American offshore wind industry, while seeking to ease environmental review requirements for fossil fuel infrastructure and other extractive industries, it is critical that lawmakers understand whether the Trump administration is fairly and objectively applying environmental review standards, or whether the administration has a double standard that favors the fossil fuel industry at the expense of renewable energy projects. We therefore request that the GAO conduct a review of the following issues:

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<sup>7</sup> E&E News, “Trump admin throws wrench into offshore wind plans,” Benjamin Storrow, August 12, 2019, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060921573>.

<sup>8</sup> Associated Press, “President’s windmill hatred is a worry for booming industry,” Ellen Knickmeyer and Rodrique Ngowi, September 30, 2019, <https://apnews.com/b903d04afe0543d1933a72c58a763e60>.

<sup>9</sup> Newsday, “Trump move to delay Mass. Wind farm concerns NY officials,” Mark Harrington, September 18, 2019, <https://www.newsday.com/news/region-state/wind-energy-projects-trump-1.36501687>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> New York Times, “Who Controls Trump’s Environmental Policy?,” Lisa Friedman and Claire O’Neill, January 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/14/climate/fossil-fuel-industry-environmental-policy.html>.

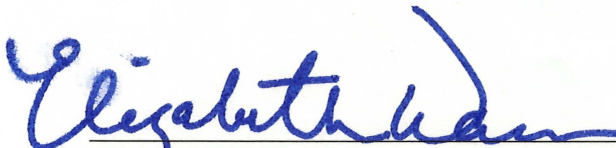
<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> New York Times, “95 Environmental Rules Being Rolled Back Under Trump,” Nadja Popovich, Livia Albeck-Ripka, and Kendra Pierre-Louis, December 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Houston Chronicle, “Rick Perry rejoins Energy Transfer board of directors,” Sergio Chapa, January 3, 2020, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/energy/article/Rick-Perry-rejoins-Energy-Transfer-board-of-14948307.php>.

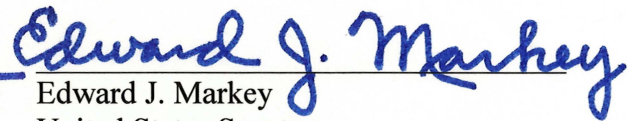
1. For what projects has the Trump administration sought to expedite, limit, or restrict environmental review?
2. For what projects has the Trump administration sought to expand or lengthen environmental review, including requesting supplemental reviews?
3. Is the Trump administration reviewing fossil fuel projects and renewable energy projects in different ways? If so, why is this happening and what is the impact of this differential treatment?
4. Are the ties of senior Trump administration officials to the fossil fuel and other extractive industries unduly influencing the administration's energy and environmental policy decisions, such as whether to seek expedited environmental review for certain projects?
5. What are the yearly and long term economic and climate impacts of delaying or blocking the off shore wind industry? How many jobs will be lost?
6. What legislative, regulatory, or other policy changes, if any, should Congress or the administration consider to ensure that the environmental review process is applied fairly and objectively across industries?

Sincerely,



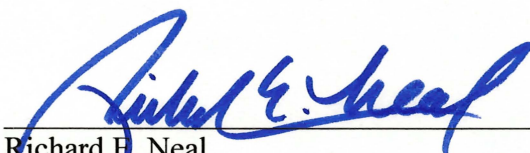
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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



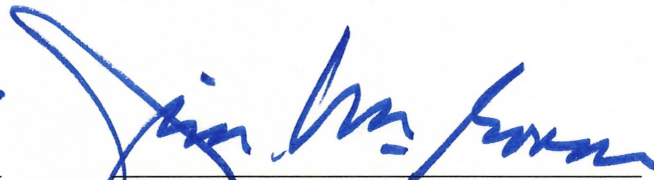
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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



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Richard E. Neal  
Member of Congress



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James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



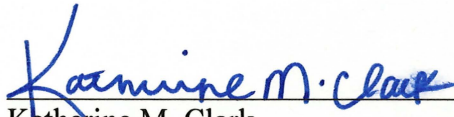
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William R. Keating  
Member of Congress

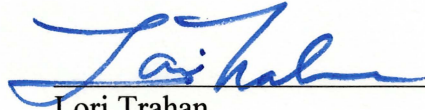


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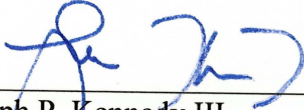
Seth Moulton  
Member of Congress



Katherine M. Clark  
Member of Congress



Lori Trahan  
Member of Congress



Joseph P. Kennedy III  
Member of Congress