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Comptroller General
of the United States

Accessible Version

June 7, 2024

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Priority Open Recommendations: Department of the Interior

Dear Madam Secretary:

The purpose of this letter is to provide an update on the overall status of the Department of the Interior’s implementation of GAO’s recommendations and call your continued personal attention to areas where open recommendations should be given high priority.¹ In November 2023, we reported that, on a government-wide basis, 75 percent of our recommendations made 4 years ago were implemented.² Interior’s recommendation implementation rate was almost 92 percent.

As of April 2024, Interior had 112 open recommendations. Fully implementing these open recommendations could significantly improve Interior’s operations.

Since our May 2023 letter, Interior has implemented eight of our 12 priority recommendations.

- As of May 2023, the Office of the Chief Information Officer issued a new Data Sharing Policy that establishes mandatory data sharing requirements and responsibilities. The policy requires that all new systems—or those undergoing modernization—provide automated data sharing capabilities, establishes a timeline for systems to have complete data dictionaries in place, and requires Interior bureaus to use common standards wherever possible. These steps meet the intent of our 2021 recommendation that Interior develop a plan to address data sharing challenges while updating and modernizing key oil and gas systems.³ These steps also help ensure Interior will address its data sharing challenges going forward.

¹Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue.

²GAO, *Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, [GAO-24-900483](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2023).

³GAO, *Oil and Gas: Interior Should Strengthen Management of Key Data Systems Used to Oversee Development on Federal Lands*, [GAO-21-209](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2021).

- In 2023, U.S. negotiators reached preliminary agreements with the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) to amend and extend various compact provisions and agreements, including the trust fund agreements. In March 2024, Congress passed, and the President signed, legislation approving the amended compacts. The amended compacts address our six recommendations, which included developing fiscal policies for the compact trust funds.⁴ For example, the new trust fund agreements for FSM and RMI include fiscal procedures that address financial management, financial reporting, and procurement, among other things. The new trust fund agreements mitigate risks to the trust funds' ability to provide a source of income, help ensure accountability for distributions from the trust funds, and improve the ability of the FSM and RMI to develop budgets based on the trust fund distributions.
- In December 2023, Interior developed and documented an updated cybersecurity and privacy risk management strategy that details how the department will assess, respond to, and monitor privacy risks, as we recommended in September 2022.⁵ Taking this step will better position Interior to manage privacy risks within acceptable thresholds.

We ask for your continued attention to the remaining four open priority recommendations. We are also adding seven priority recommendations related to improving oversight of oil and gas activities, conducting strategic planning and oversight, managing federal liability associated with property, and resolving the ownership of submerged lands in Alaska. This brings the total number of priority recommendations to 11. (See the Enclosure for the list of recommendations.)

The 11 priority recommendations fall into the following five areas.

Improving oversight of offshore oil and gas activities. Interior has faced challenges with effectively overseeing oil and gas production as well as managing related risks. We have four priority recommendations in this area. For one recommendation, Interior needs to complete and implement updated regulations on offshore decommissioning, including establishing deadlines to help ensure timely decommissioning of inactive wells and platforms. Doing so would better enable Interior to ensure the integrity of active offshore pipelines and address risks associated with their decommissioning.

For another recommendation, Interior needs to complete and implement updated requirements to limit safety and environmental risks from active and decommissioned pipelines. Doing so would strengthen Interior's ability to effectively enforce decommissioning deadlines. For a third recommendation, Interior needs to fully implement its recently updated financial assurance regulations. Doing so would better protect the federal government from fiscal risks posed by offshore decommissioning liabilities. Finally, Interior needs to implement its recently finalized strategy to ensure any cybersecurity program effectively addresses risks to offshore oil and gas infrastructure.

Ensuring access to special education services at Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. BIE supports 183 elementary and secondary schools that serve approximately 46,000 mostly low-income Indian students in rural communities on or near reservations in 23 states. We

⁴GAO, *Compacts of Free Association: Actions Needed to Prepare for the Transition of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands to Trust Fund Income*, [GAO-18-415](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 17, 2018).

⁵GAO, *Privacy: Dedicated Leadership Can Improve Programs and Address Challenges*, [GAO-22-105065](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 22, 2022).

have one priority recommendation in this area. Specifically, Interior should establish consistent requirements for schools on making up missed special education and related services, for example due to student absence, and monitor schools to ensure that they follow these requirements. Implementing this recommendation would improve BIE's ability to ensure that eligible children have access to these services at BIE schools across the country.

Conducting strategic workforce planning and oversight. Leading practices identified in prior GAO work call for strategic workforce plans to align human capital programs with emerging mission goals and develop long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.⁶

We have three priority recommendations in this area. First, we recommended that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) develop a strategic workforce plan that is aligned with leading practices. This is especially important because the agency has not implemented such a plan since it made substantial changes to its organizational structure in 2016. We also recommended that Interior develop a strategic workforce plan for those staff responsible for carrying out functions related to Interior's management of trust funds. This will help Interior better understand the resources it needs to carry out its trust functions and provide services to beneficiaries.

Lastly, we recommended that Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) conduct regular oversight and review of data on applications for leases, rights-of-way, and mortgages to assess the degree to which the applications contain all information necessary to measure processing times and whether deadlines are being met. By implementing this recommendation, BIA could ensure it has the necessary data to assess timeliness of its delivery of real estate services to Tribes and their citizens with minimal delay.

Managing liabilities associated with federal property. Interior has reported a rapid increase in its backlog of deferred maintenance and repairs, estimating that tens of billions of dollars are needed to address postponed or deferred projects. In addition, Interior may be responsible for cleaning up many of the abandoned mine properties on land it manages, which could cost billions of dollars per mine site.

We have two priority recommendations in this area. (1) To enhance information about Interior's fiscal exposure, Interior should identify the funding and time frames needed to reduce deferred maintenance and repairs in reports to Congress. (2) It should also identify the amount of known cleanup cost estimates of abandoned hardrock mines in supplemental reports or other budget materials. Implementing these two recommendations will allow Interior to better inform decision-makers about how funding levels could affect efforts to reduce maintenance backlogs as well as Interior's cleanup actions.

Resolving the ownership of submerged lands in Alaska. Under federal law, a state generally owns the unreserved submerged lands beneath waters that were navigable as of the date of statehood—which for Alaska was 1959. Alaska has identified about 150 waterways of potential interest. We have one priority recommendation in this area. Interior should coordinate with the U.S. Forest Service to secure an independent third-party facilitator to help the agencies and the State of Alaska work toward an agreement on a collaborative approach for managing submerged lands in Alaska while ownership of the lands is being resolved. By implementing this

⁶GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

recommendation, Interior could help reduce intergovernmental conflicts and minimize uncertainties for members of the public.

As the auditor of the consolidated financial statements of the U.S. government, I have noticed that the Department of the Interior had three material weaknesses in its internal control over financial reporting for fiscal year 2023, including weaknesses related to accounting policies and property, plant, and equipment. These weaknesses, as well as related auditor recommendations, are important issues. I encourage you to address them.

In April 2023, we issued our biennial update to our [High Risk List](#). This list identifies government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. It also identifies the need for transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.⁷ One of our high-risk areas—[management of federal oil and gas resources](#)—directly centers on Interior. Two other high-risk areas—[improving federal management of programs that serve Tribes and their members](#) and the [U.S. government’s environmental liability](#)—involves multiple agencies, including Interior.

Several other government-wide, high-risk areas also have direct implications for Interior and its operations. These areas include (1) [improving the management of IT acquisitions and operations](#), (2) [strategic human capital management](#), (3) [managing federal real property](#), (4) [ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation](#), and (5) [government-wide personnel security clearance process](#).

In addition to Interior’s high-risk area, we urge your continued attention to the other government-wide, high-risk issues as they relate to Interior. Progress on high-risk issues has been possible through the concerted actions and efforts of Congress, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the leadership and staff in agencies, including within Interior. In March 2022, we issued a report on key practices to successfully address high-risk areas, which can be a helpful resource as your agency continues to make progress to address high-risk issues.⁸

We also recognize the key role Congress plays in providing oversight and maintaining focus on our recommendations to ensure they are implemented and produce their desired results. Legislation enacted in December 2022 included a provision for GAO to identify any additional congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement priority recommendations and address any underlying issues relating to such implementation.⁹

Congress can use various strategies to address our recommendations, such as incorporating them into legislation. Congress can also use its budget, appropriations, and oversight processes to incentivize executive branch agencies to act on our recommendations and monitor their progress. For example, Congress can hold hearings focused on Interior’s progress in implementing GAO’s priority recommendations, withhold funds when appropriate, or take other

⁷GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

⁸GAO, *High-Risk Series: Key Practices to Successfully Address High-Risk Areas and Remove Them from the List*, [GAO-22-105184](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 3, 2022).

⁹James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 7211(a)(2), 136 Stat. 2395, 3668 (2022); H.R. Rep. No. 117-389 (2022) (accompanying Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, H.R. 8237, 117th Cong. (2022)).

actions to provide incentives for agencies to act. Moreover, Congress could follow up during the appropriations process and request periodic updates.

Congress also plays a key role in addressing any underlying issues related to the implementation of these recommendations. For example, Congress could pass legislation providing an agency explicit authority to implement a recommendation or requiring an agency to take certain actions to implement a recommendation.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Director of OMB and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available on the GAO website at [Priority Open Recommendation Letters | U.S. GAO](#).

I appreciate Interior's continued commitment to these important issues. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the issues outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me or Mark Gaffigan, Managing Director, Natural Resources & Environment, at (202) 512-3841 or gaffiganm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Our teams will continue to coordinate with your staff on all the 112 open recommendations, as well as those additional recommendations in the high-risk areas for which Interior has a leading role. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gene L. Dodaro". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, prominent "D" at the end.

Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure

cc: Laura Daniel-Davis, Acting Deputy Secretary
Joan Mooney, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Policy, Management, and Budget
The Honorable Shalanda Young, Director, Office of Management and Budget
Kevin M. Sligh, Sr., Director, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
Elizabeth Klein, Director, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
Tony Dearman, Director, Bureau of Indian Education
Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, Bureau of Land Management
Bryan Newland, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs
Darryl LaCounte, Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Martha Williams, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Charles F. Sams III, Director, National Park Service

Enclosure

Priority Open Recommendations to the Department of the Interior

Improving Oversight of Oil and Gas Activities

Offshore Oil and Gas: Updated Regulations Needed to Improve Pipeline Oversight and Decommissioning. [GAO-21-293](#). Washington, D.C.: March 19, 2021.

Year Recommendation Made: 2021

Recommendation: The Director of the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) should take actions to further develop, finalize, and implement updated pipeline regulations to address long-standing limitations regarding BSEE's ability to (1) ensure the integrity of active offshore oil and gas pipelines and (2) address safety and environmental risks associated with their decommissioning.

Actions Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of April 2024, BSEE indicated that it continues to work toward publishing updates to its pipeline regulations and now anticipates publishing a proposed rule by August 2024. To fully implement our recommendation, BSEE needs to finalize and implement updated pipeline regulations that better define how the bureau is to address safety and environmental risks associated with decommissioning pipelines and better reflect the complexities of modern deep water pipeline operations. Updating these regulations will better enable BSEE to ensure the integrity of active offshore pipelines and address risks associated with their decommissioning.

High-Risk Area: [Management of federal oil and gas resources](#)

Director: Frank Rusco

Contact Information: ruscof@gao.gov, (202) 512-3841

Offshore Oil and Gas: Strategy Urgently Needed to Address Cybersecurity Risks to Infrastructure. [GAO-23-105789](#). Washington, D.C.: October 26, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The BSEE Director should immediately develop and implement a strategy to guide the development of its most recent cybersecurity initiative; such a strategy should include (1) a risk assessment; (2) objectives, activities, and performance measures; (3) roles, responsibilities, and coordination; and (4) identification of needed resources and investments.

Actions Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of April 2024, Interior had finalized a cybersecurity strategy and initiated some actions to implement it. To fully address our recommendation, implementation of the strategy should include the following: (1) identification of cybersecurity risks; (2) relevant practices to address those risks; (3) the bureau's role in addressing them; (4) milestones for activities, such as formalizing relationships with other federal agencies and industry organizations; (5) resource needs, such as appropriate staffing levels; and (6) performance measures to assess results. Effectively implementing this strategy will help ensure BSEE addresses cybersecurity risks to offshore oil and gas infrastructure.

High-Risk Area: [Management of federal oil and gas resources; Ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation](#)

Director: Frank Rusco

Contact Information: ruscof@gao.gov, (202) 512-3841

Offshore Oil and Gas: Interior Needs to Improve Decommissioning Enforcement and Mitigate Related Risks. [GAO-24-106229](#). Washington, D.C.: January 25, 2024.

Year Recommendation Made: 2024

Recommendations: The Secretary of the Interior should:

- ensure the BSEE Director completes planned actions to identify, propose, finalize, and fully implement changes to decommissioning regulations and guidance, including by clarifying decommissioning criteria and deadlines for idle infrastructure in all regions and for end-of-lease infrastructure in the Pacific Region, and addressing any other identified limitations; and
- ensure the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) Director completes planned actions to further develop, finalize, and fully implement changes to financial assurance regulations and procedures that reduce financial risks, including by requiring higher levels of supplemental bonding, and addressing other known weaknesses.

Actions Needed: Interior agreed with these recommendations. Interior indicated it planned to implement them through two rulemakings. In the agency’s comments to GAO, BSEE stated that it was working to determine the scope of the decommissioning rule and, as of February 2024, planned to publish a proposed rule in December 2024. BOEM published a proposed financial assurance rule in June 2023 and published the final rule in April 2024.

To fully implement our recommendations, Interior needs to further develop, propose, finalize, and fully implement updated regulations on offshore decommissioning requirements—including for idle infrastructure. In addition, Interior needs to fully implement updated regulations on financial assurance requirements. Updating and implementing these regulations will strengthen BSEE’s ability to effectively enforce decommissioning deadlines and improve BOEM’s efforts to mitigate federal fiscal exposure from decommissioning liabilities.

High-Risk Area: [Management of federal oil and gas resources](#)

Director: Frank Rusco

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Ensuring Access to Special Education Services at Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Schools

Indian Education: Actions Needed to Ensure Students with Disabilities Receive Special Education Services. [GAO-20-358](#). Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2020.

Year Recommendation Made: 2020

Recommendation: The Director of BIE should establish consistent requirements for schools on making up missed special education and related services and monitor schools to ensure that they follow these requirements.

Actions Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. In September 2023, BIE established guidance for schools on special education and related services that includes consistent requirements for schools on making up services when they are not provided as scheduled. BIE distributed the guidance to schools in October 2023. In addition, BIE developed a monitoring tool to help ensure that schools follow the new requirements. As of February 2024, BIE officials said they planned to use the tool to track the provision of special education and related services in the spring, including whether schools made up missed services for students as required.

To fully implement our recommendation, BIE should demonstrate that it has monitored schools to ensure they follow the new requirements. By doing so, BIE can improve students' access to special education and related services at its schools across the country.

High-Risk Area: [Improving federal management of programs that serve Tribes and their members](#)

Director: Melissa Emrey-Arras

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Conducting Strategic Workforce Planning and Oversight

Bureau of Land Management: Better Workforce Planning and Data Would Help Mitigate the Effects of Recent Staff Vacancies. [GAO-22-104247](#). Washington, D.C.: November 16, 2021.

Year Recommendation Made: 2022

Recommendation: The Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) should develop an agency-wide strategic workforce plan that aligns the agency's human capital program with emerging mission goals and includes long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.

Action Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of February 2024, BLM developed a draft workforce planning framework and project plan. The agency expects to implement its workforce plan in fiscal year 2025. To fully implement our recommendation, BLM needs to finalize and implement an agency-wide strategic workforce plan. By finalizing such a plan, BLM will better ensure that it has the workforce necessary to fulfill the agency's mission and achieve its goals.

High-Risk Areas: [Strategic human capital management](#); [management of federal oil and gas resources](#)

Director: Frank Rusco

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Tribal Programs: Actions Needed to Improve Interior's Management of Trust Services. [GAO-23-105356](#). Washington, D.C.: April 27, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs should develop a strategic workforce plan for the staff responsible for carrying out functions related to Interior's management of trust funds.

Action Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA) officials told us in September 2022 that they were conducting internal negotiations to contract for a full workforce analysis and were expected to begin conducting the analysis in 2023. In March 2024, officials told us that they would be unable to hire a contractor due to budget constraints and instead planned to have current BTFA staff produce the workforce planning documents. Officials expected a draft plan to be completed by the end of fiscal year 2024 and finalized by August 31, 2025.

To fully implement our recommendation, Interior should complete the development of a strategic workforce plan for the staff responsible for carrying out functions related to Interior's management of trust funds. Developing such a plan would allow Interior to better understand the resources and workforce it needs to carry out its trust functions and provide services to beneficiaries.

High-Risk Area: [Improving federal management of programs that serve Tribes and their members](#)

Director: Anna Maria Ortiz

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Tribal Issues: Bureau of Indian Affairs Should Take Additional Steps to Improve Timely Delivery of Real Estate Services [Reissued with revisions on Nov. 6, 2023]. [GAO-24-105875](#). Washington, D.C.: October 26, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2024

Recommendation: The Director of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) should conduct regular oversight and review of data entered into its Trust Asset Accounting Management System (TAAMS) to assess the degree to which new lease and right-of-way applications contain all information necessary to measure processing times and whether regulatory and internal deadlines are being met. BIA should also conduct this regular oversight and review of mortgage applications following implementation of the forthcoming TAAMS mortgage module that will replace the Mortgage Tracker.

Action Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of April 2024, the agency stated it would develop a strategic plan with regular oversight and review realty data entered into TAAMS. In addition, BIA has plans to develop a "Realty Strike Team." This team will identify ways to: (1) support efficient processing of certain real estate services; (2) help improve collaboration between the agency field staff, Tribes, and others; (3) develop and provide policy and regulatory updates to staff that align with current program practices; and (4) identify other needs by the field offices for the processing of services.

To fully implement our recommendation, BIA should determine what TAAMS data it needs to measure lease, right-of-way, and mortgage processing times and whether it meets regulatory and internal deadlines. BIA should also develop a process for regularly reviewing TAAMS data—in current modules and in the future mortgage module—to ensure the data are entered

completely and regularly, and to identify gaps, if any, in data entry. By regularly overseeing the completeness of TAAMS data, BIA could ensure it has the necessary data to assess its timeliness of its delivery of real estate services to Tribes and their citizens with minimal delay, including areas where it needs to improve processing times.

High-Risk Area: [Improving federal management of programs that serve Tribes and their members](#)

Director: Anna Maria Ortiz

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Managing Liabilities Associated with Federal Property

Federal Real Property: Agencies Should Provide More Information About Increases in Deferred Maintenance and Repair. [GAO-24-105485](#). Washington, D.C.: November 16, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2024

Recommendation: The Secretary of the Interior should ensure that the department works with its component agencies to develop plans to address their deferred maintenance and repair backlogs and identify the funding and time frames needed to reduce them in congressional budget requests, related reports to decision makers, or both.

Action Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of March 2024, Interior officials said Interior will evaluate how current bureau investment plans for real property can better communicate the relationship between life cycle requirements and the effects on the deferred maintenance and repair backlog, and identify such information in reports to decision-makers. This evaluation is part of Interior's ongoing efforts to improve the overall life cycle management of assets. In its fiscal year 2025 budget justification, Interior presented additional information regarding deferred maintenance and repairs, including information on the amounts of deferred maintenance and repair that could be addressed by new construction projects as well as more extensive information for several component agencies.

However, to fully implement our recommendation, Interior needs to provide more consistent deferred maintenance and repair information across the Department and its component agencies and better describe its plans to address its backlogs, including time frames. By taking these actions, Interior could better inform decision makers about how funding levels could affect backlog reduction and help them evaluate the Department's budget requests.

High-Risk Area: [Managing federal real property](#)

Director: Andrew Von Ah

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Abandoned Hardrock Mines: Land Management Agencies Should Improve Reporting of Total Cleanup Costs. [GAO-23-105408](#). Washington, D.C.: January 13, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Secretary of the Interior should expand the information available to Congress regarding the agency's fiscal exposure from abandoned hardrock mines by clearly

identifying the amount of known cleanup cost estimates specifically for such mines in supplemental reports or other budget materials.

Action Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. In January 2023, Interior said that when it reports its environmental liabilities, the department will include the value of known environmental liabilities associated with abandoned hardrock mines in reports related to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), supplemental reports, or other budget materials.

¹ As of March 2024, Interior had not taken steps to expand the information available to Congress regarding the agency's fiscal exposure from abandoned hardrock mines.

To fully implement our recommendation, Interior should clearly identify the amount of known cleanup cost estimates specifically for abandoned hardrock mines in supplemental reports or other budget materials. By doing so, Interior could provide Congress and the public a more complete picture of Interior's long-term cleanup responsibilities and the anticipated costs associated with abandoned hardrock mines. This information could help policymakers make fully informed decisions, including about a first-of-its kind abandoned hardrock mine land program called for by the IIJA.

High-Risk Area: [U.S. government's environmental liability](#)

Director: Cardell D. Johnson

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Resolving the Ownership of Submerged Lands in Alaska

Alaska Land Management: Resolving Ownership of Submerged Lands. [GAO-23-106235](#). Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Secretary of the Interior should ensure that the Directors of BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service coordinate with the Chief of the Forest Service to secure an independent third-party facilitator to help agencies within the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture and the State of Alaska work toward agreement on a collaborative approach for the management of submerged lands in Alaska while ownership is being resolved.

Actions Needed: Interior agreed with this recommendation. As of January 2024, Interior stated that it will coordinate with the Department of Agriculture to obtain the assistance of an independent third-party facilitator by July 31, 2024.

To fully implement our recommendation, Interior, in coordination with the Department of Agriculture, first needs to secure an independent third-party facilitator, such as from the John S. McCain III National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution. Then, Interior should employ the facilitator to find collaborative approaches with the State of Alaska to manage submerged lands, which include about 150 waterways of potential interest identified by the state. Doing so would help Interior demonstrate respect and support the rights and interests of the State of Alaska. Further, Interior could reduce intergovernmental conflicts with the State of Alaska,

¹Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021).

identify measures to accelerate lengthy administrative process for resolving ownership of submerged lands, and ensure its ability to fulfill its land-management mission.

Director: Cardell D. Johnson

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