

United States Government Accountability Office

**Report to the Ranking Member,  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government  
Management, the Federal Workforce and  
the District of Columbia,  
Committee on Homeland Security and  
Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate**

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November 2008

## **CONFIRMATION OF POLITICAL APPOINTEES**

**Eliciting Nominees'  
Views on Management  
Challenges Within  
Agencies and Across  
Government**

GAO-09-194

## Appendix IX: Department of the Interior

The Department of the Interior is one of the nation's principal conservation and land management agencies. Its mission is to protect and provide access to our nation's natural and cultural heritage and honor our trust responsibilities to American Indians and Alaska Natives and our commitments to island communities. Operating at approximately 2,400 locations, the department is responsible for 500 million acres of America's public land (about one-fifth of the land in the United States), a variety of water and underwater resources, including 479 dams and 348 reservoirs, and more than 56,000 active onshore and offshore oil and gas leases.

Approximately 30 percent of the nation's energy production comes from projects on department-managed lands and offshore areas. The department is comprised of eight bureaus: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Minerals Management Service, the Office of Surface Mining, and the U.S. Geological Survey. The President's budget for the department for fiscal year 2009 is \$10.7 billion, including \$2.1 billion for park operations under the Centennial Initiative to prepare for the 100th anniversary of the National Park System.

As the guardian of much of the nation's vast natural resources, the department is entrusted to preserve the nation's most awe-inspiring landscapes, such as the wild beauty of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Denali National Parks; our most historic places, like Independence Hall and the Gettysburg battlefield; and such revered national icons as the Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument. At the same time, the department is to provide for the environmentally sound production of oil, gas, minerals, and other resources found on the nation's public lands; protect habitat to sustain fish and wildlife; help manage water resources in western states; and provide scientific and technical information to allow for sound decision making about resources. The department's management of this vast federal estate is largely characterized by the struggle to balance the demand for greater use and consumption of its resources with the need to conserve and protect them for the benefit of future generations.

### Key Issues Needing Attention

- Strengthening Resource Protection
- Strengthening the Accountability of Indian and Island Community Programs
- Improving Federal Land Acquisition and Management
- Reducing Interior's Deferred Maintenance Backlog
- Ensuring the Accurate Collection of Royalties
- Strengthening Resource Protection

### Questions

#### Strengthening Resource Protection:

1. Wildland fires continue to threaten our nation's public lands and communities and consume significant appropriations as the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service prepare for and respond to wildland fires. How would you go about developing a cohesive fire strategy that identifies long-term options and

associated funding needs for responding to wildland fire issues? What steps could you take to contain and manage the costs of the strategy?

2. Over the past several years, federal land management agencies have been participating in collaborative resource management efforts that involve public and private stakeholders working together to resolve natural resource conflicts and problems. Can you describe specific examples where you have worked across organizational boundaries with stakeholders in other sectors to develop coordinated solutions? What steps do you think would be necessary to enhance further collaboration among federal, state, and local stakeholders to reduce resource management conflict and improve natural resource conditions?

### **Strengthening the Accountability of Indian and Island Community Programs**

3. Having land held in trust for the benefit of tribes or individual Indians is important for tribal sovereignty and economic development. GAO and Island Community and the department's Inspector General have reported that it usually takes over a year for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to process land in Programs trust applications for both gaming and nongaming purposes. One application that GAO reviewed took almost 19 years. What experience do you have with developing an action plan to address these challenges? How would you instill a priority and a sense of urgency in the department to strengthen its performance in this area?
4. Tribal membership disputes and tribal leadership disputes seem to be occurring more and more frequently. What experience do you have in working with tribal leadership and trying to resolve these types of disputes or in trying to prevent them?
5. GAO has reported that the department could be doing more to assist island communities with long-standing financial and program management difficulties. What qualifications would you cite for being able to ensure that proper guidance, technical assistance, and accountability are put in place to help island communities make progress in areas such as accounting for expenditures, collecting taxes and other revenues, controlling expenditures, and delivering program services?

### **Improving Federal Land Acquisition and Management**

6. GAO and the department's Inspector General have reported on the Acquisition and difficulties the Bureau of Land Management and other federal land management agencies have had in managing land appraisals and the resulting loss of millions of federal dollars. Challenges include a wide variation in the quality of appraisals, the lack of a system for ensuring realistic time frames for appraisal delivery, and inadequate inspections to ensure landowners' compliance with easement restrictions. What aspects of your b

background in internal controls would enable you to assure that these challenges are addressed? What actions would you recommend to help improve performance?

7. Since the inception of the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program in the late 1950s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has acquired and permanently protected about 3 million acres of wetlands and grasslands in the Prairie Pothole Region, primarily using Migratory Bird Conservation Funds. However, at the current pace of acquisitions, it could take the service around 150 years and billions of dollars to acquire its 12 million goal acres, and some emerging market forces suggest that the service may have only several decades before most of its goal acreage is converted to agricultural uses. What experience do you have with developing action plans for a dynamic business environment? How would you help the federal government acquire more lands, and what strategies would you institute?

### **Reducing Interior's Deferred Maintenance Backlog**

8. Many tribes, individual Indians, and non-Indians rely on irrigation Deferred Maintenance projects managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide water for their agriculture. In 2006, GAO reported that the estimated maintenance backlog for 16 Indian irrigation projects was about \$850 million, and there are maintenance backlogs for Indian schools. How do you balance priorities to ensure that regular maintenance happens, and what steps do you believe should be taken to address these maintenance backlogs?

### **Ensuring the Accurate Collection of Royalties**

9. What steps would you take to ensure that management of public oil and gas resources is efficient, effective, and generates an appropriate return to the public? How does one go about deciding the balance between the need to protect our nation's natural resources and the pressure to rapidly expand energy production on federal lands?
10. GAO, the department's Inspector General, and the Royalty Policy Committee have made more than 100 recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior over the past year on ways to improve the accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness of royalty collections for oil and gas produced on federal lands and waters. What specific steps should the department take to ensure that a system is in place to evaluate and implement these recommendations?

## Enhancing Other Revenue Collection

11. The collection and control of authorized fees and revenues has been a major management challenge for the department for years. Have you managed or led an organization with fee collection responsibilities? What management controls would you find important to have in place to assure that fees were being set, charged, collected, and used properly? Are there practices or innovations from elsewhere that you think you might bring to enhance and better control the collection of authorized revenues at the department.
12. The department operates in a decentralized environment, allowing the many planning and project decisions to be made by managers assigned to parks and other units. Have you managed or led in a decentralized organization? How would you balance the need to provide discretion to local managers while ensuring that they are accountable for achieving department-wide goals and objectives while operating efficiently?
13. The department, like many other federal departments and agencies, has an aging workforce, and some of its positions (such as firefighters) require special skills and abilities that take years to train and develop. Have you had to wrestle with attracting and retaining talent? What specific workforce challenges have you faced and how did you overcome them?
14. Over the years, GAO has identified a number of areas where program management problems exist at the department. Resolving systemic management problems will require strong leadership to ensure needed steps are taken and funding priorities are identified. Can you describe your style and philosophy for holding executives accountable for making progress in program management areas? What specific methods do you use to ensure that progress is being made?

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