

United States Senate

April 12, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

I write to you regarding the reported disproportionate reassignments of Native American career officials within the Department of the Interior (Department) and the impact this has to not only the agency, but to Indian Country as a whole. Given the additional funding requested in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) FY19 budget request for further reorganization efforts within the Department, I am concerned about the prospect of future reassignments and lack of consultation with Tribes on this proposal.

This past year 33 senior officials were reassigned, and nearly a third of those reassignments were Native American staff. Notably, Native Americans make up less than 10 percent of the Department's workforce. I understand these assignments are currently under investigation by several government agencies, and I urge you to further consider the devastating impacts this can have on initiatives in Indian Country. Coupled with severe understaffing and leadership vacancies at the Department, I am deeply concerned that these reassignments impact the agency's ability to serve Native Americans and send the wrong message to Tribes.

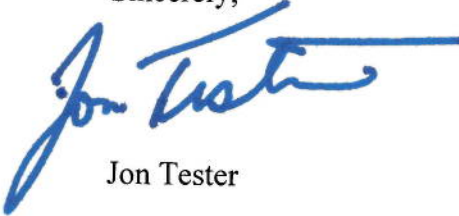
The Department has a close connection to our Tribal Nations and plays an essential role in upholding the federal government's trust and treaty responsibilities. In the President's FY19 Budget Request, \$900,000 was included for BIA's Operation of Indian Programs to support the massive and far-reaching reorganization of the Department along common regional boundaries. I have raised my concerns with this proposal with you before, including the scant details available to the public and no public comment period. In order to ensure greater transparency in this process, I ask for answers to the following questions.

What role will the BIA funds play in this larger reorganization? What, specifically, will they be used for? How many reassignments have you planned for in this effort? And how many of those will be Native American staff or staff involved in Indian Affairs? Consultation with Tribes is not optional and should never be an afterthought. Any change in structure for BIA or the Department should only be considered after robust consultation with Tribes. I am requesting a schedule and commitment of such consultation.

Government works best when it is transparent and accountable. Our workforce is strongest when it is diverse and reflects the people it serves—especially at the Department of the Interior, which maintains a close relationship with our Tribal Nations and Native peoples. In

addition to the concerns I have with the impacts for Indian Country, my concerns remain with the Department's overall plans to reorganize. I urge you to publish your proposal in the Federal Register, solicit public comment, and actively engage state and tribal governments before advancing this proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester