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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of
Chairman Doc Hastings
House Committee on Natural Resources
Full Committee Hearing on
“Committee Oversight of Department of the Interior:
Questioning of Key Department of the Interior Officials.”
Thursday, September 13, 2012, at 10:00 a.m

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For well over two years, Republicans on this Committee have been asking questions and conducting an extensive investigation into how and why an Interior Department report was edited to appear as though the moratorium in the Gulf of Mexico was supported by a panel of engineering experts when it was not.

The experts were forced to rebut the implication that they had approved the six-month drilling moratorium and even wrote that “a blanket moratorium is not the answer. It will not measurably reduce the risk further and it will have a lasting impact on the nation’s economy which may be greater than that of the oil spill.”

The Department may have ultimately apologized to the peer reviewers after they raised objections, but the Obama Administration has never answered basic questions regarding how and why the decision was made to impose a moratorium that put thousands of Americans out of work, whether the views of the engineering experts were intentionally misrepresented, and how the Administration initially responded to the complaints by the peer reviewers.

Today, two Department officials will appear before us to answer questions on this matter.

Neal Kemkar, Special Assistant to the Counselor to the Secretary, personally assisted with the Drilling Moratorium Report, communicated with the peer reviewers, and transmitted edits with White House staff.

Mary Katherine Ishee, who served as Deputy Administration for Minerals Management Service, was also personally involved in the deliberations to impose the drilling moratorium and the Drilling Moratorium Report. However, she was never even interviewed by the Office of Inspector General during its investigation, despite a recommendation to do so by another witness.

The circumstances that brought us all here today are not preferable, and I had hoped it wouldn’t have to come to this.

Since the beginning of this investigation, the Department has stonewalled every avenue we've taken to get answers. The Department largely ignored over a dozen letters seeking documents and answers, has failed to comply with an official Congressional subpoena issued in April, and failed to make key Department officials available for on-the-record interviews.

It was only after the threat of a subpoena became real that the Department committed to have these two witnesses and others appear voluntarily. These and other witnesses were originally invited to appear at a July 25th hearing, but failed to confirm their attendance less than 20 hours before the hearing. It wasn't until the Full Committee approved a motion to provide subpoena authority to compel these individuals to appear that the Department communicated their willingness to cooperate.

It shouldn't take the threat of subpoenas to get cooperation from an Administration that boasts of openness and transparency. If the Obama Administration truly has nothing to hide, then why not turn over the requested documents? Why withhold document from public view? Why ignore a Congressional subpoena? And why resist on-the-record interviews by Department officials who were directly involved?

This could have been resolved over a year ago if the Department had simply complied and answered questions. And quite frankly, it should have been resolved nearly two years ago during the IG's investigation – but as we've discovered, there are serious questions about the thoroughness and independence of that investigation.

It should also be noted that subpoenas were recently issued to Mr. Kemhar and Ms. Ishee to provide before this hearing copies of all documents that were created, sent, or received by them between April 26, 2010 and June 30, 2010 related to the development, editing, review, issuance, response, or reaction to the Drilling Moratorium Report. To date, neither individual has complied with the subpoena for documents.

This Committee is committed to getting answers and will continue to pursue every avenue necessary. That includes additional questioning of Department officials and seeking answers from within the White House itself.

The drilling moratorium directly impacted the lives of thousands of individuals in the Gulf of Mexico. It caused widespread economic devastation and decreased American energy production. The Administration falsely stated in their report that the moratorium was reviewed and supported by the engineering experts, but we all know that wasn't true. The people in the Gulf deserve to know how and why that happened. I hope to get some direct answers today.