

# STOCKPILE OF UNUSED DRILLING PERMITS HITS NEW HIGH

**COMPANIES HOLDING NEARLY 10,000 APPROVED AND UNUSED PERMITS**

A new report from the Government Accountability Office requested by Natural Resources Committee Chair Raúl M. Grijalva and Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Chair Alan Lowenthal finds that oil and gas companies were, as of the end of fiscal year 2019, sitting on **9,950 approved drilling permits they were not using**. Only 418 of those permits are being prepared to be used in the near future.

The Trump administration's obsession with churning out permits has led to this enormous backlog, which is 46 percent higher than the number of unused and approved permits at the end of fiscal year 2017.

This stockpile of approved and unused permits shows that additional "permitting considerations," as the American Petroleum Institute cryptically requested for oil and gas companies in a March 20 letter to President Trump, are unnecessary.

GAO found that the combination of companies applying for so many unneeded permits and BLM's single-minded focus on processing those applications has "interfer[ed] with certain BLM staff's ability to fulfill other job responsibilities, including conducting well inspections."<sup>[1]</sup>

The impacts of this focus on permitting over safety and environmental protection are apparent in BLM data the Committee has received. The number of environmental inspections BLM conducted in 2019 was down 14 percent from 2016.<sup>[2]</sup> The number of violations and amount of fines issued in 2017 and 2018 were down 43 percent and 92 percent, respectively, from the annual average in the 2011-2016 period.<sup>[3]</sup>

Under the Obama administration, the Bureau of Land Management posted data on approved-but-unused permits on its public website. The Trump administration discontinued the practice.

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[1] GAO report, p. 14

[2] BLM FY21 Budget Justification, page V-76 (pdf page 128)

[3] Data provided from BLM to the committee.

