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

October 6, 2016

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The Honorable Neil Kornze
Director, Bureau of Land Management
BLM Washington Office
1849 C Street NW, Rm. 5665
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Kornze:

Three years ago, Congress passed the Helium Stewardship Act (HSA) with broad bipartisan support to extend and reform the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) helium program. The HSA recognized the irreplaceable role helium plays in research and development for our space, defense, and medical industries. Thus, one of the primary considerations in developing that legislation was ensuring federal helium users, including researchers supported by federal grants, would have continued access to helium at a reasonable price. Congress sought to maintain continued supply of this vital element to federal users beyond the life of the Amarillo facility by dictating a “Continued Access for Federal Users” phase at 50 U.S.C. 167d(c).

Unfortunately, in a report issued today by the American Physical Society, the American Chemical Society, and the Materials Research Society, the helium supply situation for researchers is described as being in a state of “crisis”, with end-user prices for helium increasing by as much as 250 percent over the past seven years. By requiring scientists to pay such exorbitant prices for helium, funding is being diverted from other crucial priorities, such as training the next generation of American scientists. The situation will likely worsen for researchers and other federal helium users once the BLM Federal Helium Reserve ceases operation at the end of September 2021.

With the end of the federal helium program only five years away, planning must begin as soon as possible to ensure that federal helium users, including grantees, have access to a stable and reasonably priced supply of helium. As such, we would like to direct the BLM to two of the recommendations in today’s report: 1) clarifying and publishing the BLM’s helium regulations for federal grantees, and 2) taking a portion of royalties due from federal lessees in the form of produced helium and requiring reasonably priced access to that helium by federal end-users. We believe both recommendations have merit and should be prioritized within the BLM to ensure crucial research is not further hindered.

The Hon. Neil Kornze

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We look forward to continuing to work with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Rob Bishop
Chairman
House Committee on Natural Resources



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources