

January 8, 2013

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar,

The Helium Privatization Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-273) authorizes the sale of crude helium from the U.S. Federal Helium Reserve until repayment of the program's debt is completed. We are writing today for clarification of the effective date of termination of the Federal Helium Reserve should the Department receive sufficient funds to meet the repayment requirement.

In testimony before the Committee, the BLM Deputy Assistant Director for Minerals and Realty Management testified that BLM expected repayment to occur in FY 2013. It is our understanding that this point could be reached as early as March or April of 2013. On the other hand, the statute also directs the Secretary to reconcile the balances in the helium production fund "(w)ithin 7 days of the commencement of each fiscal year..." suggesting that the debt repayment would occur in October of 2013.

Responsible resource management of the Federal Helium Reserve is critical. Currently the Federal Helium Reserve supplies roughly 40 percent of domestic and 30 percent of the world helium demand. The Committee held a legislative hearing on May 10, 2012 to consider legislation to extend the Federal helium program. We recognize the importance of preventing a disruption of the helium supply chain that would impact many sectors of our society including health care, high-tech manufacturing, basic science research, and space missions. It is our intention to address this issue quickly.

We appreciate your timely consideration so that the Committee has the benefit of knowing the timetable for phase out of the program pursuant to current law.

Sincerely,

Sen. Ron Wyden

Sen. Lisa Murkowski