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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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May 17, 2021

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Department of Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland,

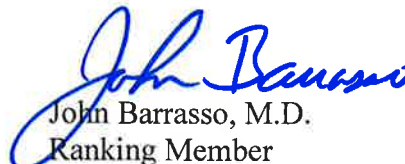
I have heard reports that high-ranking Biden Administration officials have utilized various encrypted messaging applications while conducting official government business. The use of these encrypted applications, such as Signal, could represent an effort to cloak certain communications, limit Administration accountability, and potentially obscure illicit activity. The use of encrypted messaging could be an intentional effort to limit public access to information traditionally available to the American public through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and sunshine laws.

These reports are deeply concerning. As you know, it is imperative that executive branch officials, especially unelected appointees, operate with the utmost integrity and transparency to maintain the public trust.

As Secretary, you have a key responsibility to ensure the ethical conduct of every Department of Interior (DOI) employee. Offering clear guidance and oversight of the conduct of DOI employees as it relates to official communications and records, and ensuring the American public is well-informed of the decision-making process within the agency is important to all citizens who utilize our public lands and whose livelihoods depend on them.

To clarify DOI's current position on the use of encrypted communications and ensuring free, transparent access to relevant DOI official records, I ask that you respond to the following questions no later than May 24, 2021.

Sincerely,


John Barrasso, M.D.
Ranking Member

Questions

1. Are you or any DOI employee aware of the use of any encrypted messaging applications by any DOI officials or employees on either personal or DOI-issued equipment? If yes, is this software used in the conduct of official business?
2. Which DOI officials are using encrypted messaging software for the conduct of official business?
3. Are all these communications being archived?
 - a. What specific steps is DOI taking to archive encrypted messages so they are able to be made publically available upon request?
4. Will both Congress and the public have access to any of these messages exchanged over the course of official business?
5. Has any DOI official or employee used any encrypted messaging software in communication with any White House official?
 - a. If yes, please list the White House officials.
6. Has any DOI official or employee used any encrypted messaging software to communicate with external and/or private parties/individuals related to official business?
 - a. If yes, please list them.