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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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June 5, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary Burgum:

I am writing to express deep concern regarding reports that a senior official at the Department of the Interior (DOI or Department) may be involved in matters that present a conflict of interest.

On April 29, 2026, you testified before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources regarding the President's 2027 Budget Request.¹ Following the hearing, in questions for the record, I asked you about reports that Karen Budd-Falen, the Department's Associate Deputy Secretary, failed to previously disclose critical information in her financial disclosure report and recently received a partial ethics waiver permitting her to work on matters that could benefit her family. Since submitting these question, *The Washington Post* has reported that Ms. Budd-Falen has been involved in changes to policies that may benefit ranching businesses like her own family's business.²

According to *The Washington Post*, in an interview conducted with Senator Lummis in December 2025³ as part of a Congressional Western Caucus event, Ms. Budd-Falen appears to suggest that she has been involved in working on policy matters related to grazing – benefitting her immediate family. At the event, Ms. Budd-Falen stated:

¹ Full Committee Hearing to Examine the President's Budget Request for the Department of the Interior for Fiscal Year 2027, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, April 29, 2026.

<https://www.energy.senate.gov/hearings/2026/4/full-committee-hearing-to-examine-the-president-s-budget-request-for-the-department-of-the-interior-for-fiscal-year-2027>.

² "Trump official says she's involved in policy changes that benefit her family's ranches, video shows," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2026.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/05/09/karen-budd-falen-grazing-policies-ethics-probe/>

³ "Senator Cynthia Lummis Account," X, December 6, 2025.

<https://x.com/SenLummis/status/1997402299010879788>; "Senator Cynthia Lummis Account," YouTube, December 16, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq_bXwgTKxw.

“We added some categorical exclusions so that if you have places like in northern Nevada where my father-in-law's place is, I mean, it's lots of cheat grass and you got to graze that cheat grass at the right time of year. And so when we added categorical exclusion so you can move cattle in there temporarily, get some of this grass grazed off, that'll also really help the wildfire situation.”⁴

Ms. Budd-Falen statements at the event suggesting she worked on matters involving grazing policy appears to have come months before she received a waiver from the Department. In late March, *Politico* reported that the Department issued Ms. Budd-Falen a section 208 waiver on March 11, 2026.⁵ Under the limited waiver, Ms. Budd-Falen is permitted to work on “certain particular matters of general applicability, including, but not limited to, particular matters of general applicability involving grazing leases or permits pending at the Department.”⁶

This recent news comes on the heels of earlier reporting that Ms. Budd-Falen previously omitted disclosing critical information in her financial disclosure reports while serving in the first Trump Administration. In January 2026, *The New York Times* reported that Ms. Budd-Falen omitted disclosing her family's financial interest associated with a lithium mine approved by DOI⁷. In 2018, Ms. Budd-Falen's husband signed an agreement to sell water rights from a family ranch to Lithium Nevada Corporation, a subsidiary of Lithium Americas, for \$3.5 million⁸. Weeks prior to the sale, Ms. Budd-Falen received a waiver that allowed her family to retain a financial interest in the ranch.⁹ In November 2019, a year after her husband signed the water rights agreement, Ms. Budd-Falen met with Lithium America executives at DOI. At the time of this meeting, Lithium Nevada Corporation had pending business before DOI.¹⁰ Ms. Budd-Falen reportedly omitted

⁴ “Happy Trails: Episode 3-- A Conversation on Responsible Land Management with Karen Budd-Falen, DOI,” Senator Cynthia Lummis YouTube Page, posted on December 16, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq_bXwgTKxw (timestamp 24:48).

⁵ “Interior official with ties to lithium mine granted ‘rare’ ethics waiver,” *Politico* (E&E News), March 30, 2026. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2026/03/30/interior-official-with-ties-to-lithium-mine-granted-rare-ethics-waiver-00850220>. See also “Limited Waiver Pursuant to 118 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1) and C.F.R. § 3501.103(e),” United States Department of the Interior, March 11, 2026. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=0000019d-3f30-d065-a7bf-7f3c12990000>.

⁶ “Limited Waiver Pursuant to 118 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1) and C.F.R. § 3501.103(e),” United States Department of the Interior, March 11, 2026. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=0000019d-3f30-d065-a7bf-7f3c12990000>. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/documents/165c50e2-90d0-431e-ba32-9f8753359a1f.pdf>; “Trump official says she’s involved in policy changes that benefit her family’s ranches, video shows,” *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2026.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/05/09/karen-budd-falen-grazing-policies-ethics-probe/>.

⁷ “The Trump Administration Approved a Big Lithium Mine. A Top Official’s Husband Profited,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/climate/lithium-mine-interior-karen-budd-falen-water-contract.html>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ “Interior official granted ethics waiver just before family’s lithium mine deal,” *Politico* (GreenWire), February 24, 2026. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2026/02/24/interior-official-granted-ethics-waiver-just-before-familys-lithium-mine-deal-00794791>.

¹⁰ “The Trump Administration Approved a Big Lithium Mine. A Top Official’s Husband Profited,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/climate/lithium-mine-interior-karen-budd-falen>

reporting the sale on four successive financial disclosure reporting forms.¹¹

Ms. Budd-Falen's statement and actions raise significant questions about her compliance with federal ethics laws and standards. Public officials have an obligation to put the public's interest ahead of their own. Allegations of conflicts of interest should be handled with the extreme care and seriousness they deserve. For these reasons and to better understand Ms. Budd-Falen's compliance with federal ethics laws and standards, I request that you make the Department's Designated Ethics Official (DAO) available to brief the Committee by June 22, 2026.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Should you have any questions about this request, please contact my staff at (202) 224-4971.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Martin Heinrich', is positioned above a horizontal line.

MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator

[water-contract.html](#); “Interior official granted ethics waiver just before family’s lithium mine deal,” Politico (GreenWire), February 24, 2026. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2026/02/24/interior-official-granted-ethics-waiver-just-before-familys-lithium-mine-deal-00794791>.

¹¹ Id.