

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 8, 2026

Ms. Orice W. Brown
Acting Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Ms. Williams Brown,

The April 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* disaster was one of the worst environmental catastrophes in our nation's history, killing 11 workers and releasing millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. In the aftermath of the spill, multiple investigations identified regulatory failures and deeply entrenched ethical issues and conflicts of interest within the former Minerals Management Service (MMS), which simultaneously prompted offshore development, collected royalties, and conducted oversight. In response, in October 2011, the Department of the Interior (Interior) dissolved MMS and established the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) to separate offshore leasing and resource development responsibilities from independent safety and environmental enforcement functions.¹ The reorganization was intended to address the very regulatory failures that contributed to the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster by ensuring that offshore safety and environmental protection would not be subordinated to industry pressure or revenue generation.

Sixteen years later, offshore oil and gas development has only increased. U.S. oil production remains near record highs, with approximately 95 percent of offshore production now occurring in deepwater environments that present substantially greater technical, operational, and environmental risks. New frontier projects, including the recently approved Kaskida development, are pushing into ultra-deepwater conditions characterized by extreme pressures, temperatures, and operational complexity. At the same time, the Trump administration and congressional Republicans are aggressively pursuing expanded offshore leasing, opening additional areas to drilling, and reducing royalty rates that shortchange taxpayers while incentivizing further fossil fuel extraction. Interior has also expanded its focus on cataloging offshore critical mineral deposits in anticipation of future seabed mining activities that carry poorly understood, but likely significant, environmental risks.

Against this backdrop, Interior's April 2026 announcement that it intends to reconsolidate BOEM and BSEE into a new Marine Minerals Administration (MMA) raises serious concerns about whether Interior is collapsing the firewall between resource development and independent safety oversight that was established after *Deepwater Horizon*. Interior has asserted that the reorganization will improve coordination, but the Department has provided little detail explaining how combining these functions would strengthen independent environmental review and safety

¹Interior also separated out the revenue collection portion of the former Mineral Management Service into its own entity, the Office of Natural Resources Revenue.

enforcement, particularly at a time when offshore development activities are becoming increasingly complex and risky.

These concerns are compounded by the fact that Interior is pursuing this reorganization amid significant workforce reductions, including staffing losses resulting from the 2025 Deferred Resignation Program and additional proposed cuts in the fiscal year 2027 budget request. The Department is simultaneously expanding the scope of its responsibilities to include offshore critical minerals leasing and other new activities. Together, these developments raise significant questions about whether the proposed consolidation would undermine the independent oversight and institutional capacity necessary to protect offshore workers, coastal communities, marine ecosystems, and taxpayers from another preventable disaster.

To help Congress better understand the potential implications of establishing MMA, we request that GAO examine the following:

1. To what extent has Interior defined specific, measurable objectives that support its broader goals for reconsolidating BOEM and BSEE into MMA?
2. To what extent has Interior engaged in transition planning to ensure that MMA meets its specific objectives while also maintaining the resources needed to maintain the oversight functions currently managed by BOEM and BSEE?
3. To what extent has the agency taken steps to ensure it will have the needed resources and capacity, including the scientific expertise, for effective oversight of the development of the nation's offshore energy and marine mineral resources?
4. To what extent did Interior take steps to ensure that the new agency's processes and decision-making—including as they pertain to permitting—will be based on sound science that is independent of undue outside influence?
5. What steps did Interior take to ensure the new agency has developed a framework for consultation and stakeholder engagement, specifically, on the agency's expanded scope of authorities for offshore minerals leasing? How will MMA's processes uphold Tribal trust responsibilities and states' authorities for consistency review under the Coastal Zone Management Act?

Sincerely,



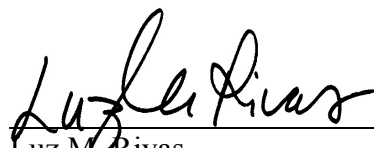
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, House
Natural Resources Committee



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Energy and Natural
Resources



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Luz M. Rivas
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