

September 29, 2025

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

Dear Secretary Burgum:

I write to express my deep concerns about this Administration's decision to eliminate funding for the U.S. Geological Survey's Ecosystems Mission Area (EMA). This short-sighted decision will have a lasting negative impact on Hawaii and throughout the Pacific Region. I urge you, as the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, to change course and fully support this mission area.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the EMA "provides science that directly benefits the health, safety, and prosperity of the American people by providing trusted and timely information to help address the Nation's toughest management and conservation issues impacting public lands and the surrounding communities that benefit from them." By zeroing out funding for the EMA, the President's fiscal year (FY) 2026 budget proposal poses a direct threat to that critical science and the communities that depend on it.

In Hawaii and throughout the Pacific Region, the USGS EMA funds a significant amount of research that advances our understanding of the natural environment, directly benefits our communities, and supports the next generation of scientists. For example, the Pacific Islands Climate Adaptation Science Center, or PI-CASC, is hosted at the University of Hawaii Manoa and is comprised of 13 federal and university staff and research fellows and, supports over 25 student researchers each year. This center, which serves Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and American Samoa, not only provides critical information to natural and cultural resource managers and decisionmakers on climate impacts but also supports students who will go on to become our country's next generation of scientists. The President's budget does away with the PI-CASC, eight other regional CASCs located throughout the country, and the national CASC. Further, for the first time since the CASCs were established in 2010, your department has failed to renew in a timely manner contracts with three of the regional centers that expire in 2025—the Northeast CASC, the South Central CASC, and PI-CASC.

Defunding USGS EMA will also result in the shuttering of the Pacific Islands Ecosystem Research Center, or PIERC. This center employs 26 people and 21 federally funded research staff and performs critical work to protect biological resources in Hawaii and throughout the Pacific Islands. This work includes researching the brown tree snake to ensure it does not spread

from Guam to other islands while also managing brown tree snake populations within Guam. PIERC staff are also working to save the remaining populations of Hawaiian native forest birds, which are critically important to native ecosystems and Hawaiian culture, as they face extinction. PIERC also serves as a lead organization in the fight to arrest addressing Rapid Ohia Death, which has killed millions of native Ohia trees throughout Hawaii. Finally, PIERC is aiding in the effort to restore ecosystems following increasingly frequent wildfire events throughout the Hawaiian Islands.

Other important USGS work in Hawaii that will abruptly end should EMA be eliminated includes the Hawaii Cooperative Fishery Research Unit (HCFRU), which supports 2 federal employees and 10-22 students each year to support the priorities of the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR). Specifically, HCFRU teaches and trains students and DLNR staff on monitoring non-commercial fisheries, managing fisheries, and protecting public health from fish poisoning. At a time when interest in increasing domestic food supply in Hawaii is so high, ending this federal support is inappropriate. Additionally, the USGS National Wildlife Health Center Field Station in Honolulu, which is made up of 3 staff, specifically works with the Department of Defense and the State of Hawaii to control movement of marine and terrestrial invasive species in Hawaii, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. Given the geopolitical significance of the region and the susceptibility of island ecosystems to invasive species, this loss of decades of expertise and experience would be detrimental to natural resource managers. It would also be a waste of \$2 million, which was allocated in 2024 to complete state-of-the-art laboratory facilities to serve wildlife health needs for Hawaii and the Pacific Islands.

We cannot rely on Congress alone to fix this problem. Even if Congress disagrees with the “savings” that defunding EMA provides and appropriates funding, there is no guarantee that this Administration will follow the rule of law. Currently, this Administration is freezing funding for a variety of programs and agreements across the executive branch to align with the President’s priorities, sometimes providing funding that needs to be dispersed within weeks, and other times completely clawing back the funding that Congress has appropriated. There are reports that FY2025 Congressionally appropriated funds for USGS EMA programs will be rescinded. Furthermore, for the CASCs specifically, even if federal funding is provided by Congress and your department makes the funds available, the three regional centers with expired contracts will not be able to continue operations without signing new agreements. Your support for EMA and within this DOI mission areas like PIERC, PI-CASC, and the CFRUs is needed now.

These are just a few examples of how devastating these decisions are for Hawaii and the Pacific Region, but these impacts will play out in communities across the country. The President’s FY26 budget claims that the important research funded by the USGS EMA is best supported by states. With no plan in place for how states will successfully continue the work, one can assume gaps will form, setting our country back by years, if not decades, and making us vulnerable to competing foreign entities in the region. In the short term, resource managers will have less information on which to base decisions. Long-term, our pipeline of next generation scientists will be weakened reducing the United States’ standing as a global leader and eroding our nation’s influence.

If this Administration is successful in eliminating the USGS EMA, the costs will far exceed any short-term savings—eroding our global leadership in climate research and our ability to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to environmental threats. I urge you to reverse these ill-conceived cuts and restore full funding and support for the EMA.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Mazie K. Hirono". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mazie" being the most prominent.

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator