

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

September 13, 2021

Dr. Dave Applegate
Acting Director
U.S. Geological Survey
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Acting Director Applegate,

As we observed the 20th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, President Biden's recent abandonment of Americans, Afghan allies, and military assets to the Taliban left our nation dismayed. Throughout the withdrawal process, the President claimed his Administration planned for every contingency.¹ Despite these assurances, the Biden Administration inadequately considered the impacts of the Taliban gaining control of Afghanistan's critical minerals. Prior to President Biden's withdrawal, U.S. military service members were placed in harm's way to provide security for civilian U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) scientists who made more than 250 trips to Afghanistan to research the country's natural resources.² Therefore, we seek to assess the extent of the natural resources and U.S. taxpayer funded research the Taliban will exploit.

Between 2004 and 2019, the USGS spent more than 81 million dollars surveying Afghanistan's minerals.³ The minerals discovered are estimated at a combined value between one and three trillion dollars.⁴ Afghanistan has a wealth of traditional precious metals, as well as the metals essential for new technologies.⁵ For example, based on the amount of lithium in the country, the U.S. Department of Defense anticipated that Afghanistan could be the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" due to the metal's importance in batteries.⁶ Additionally, Afghanistan is home to the rare earth elements used in electric vehicles, wind turbines, and missile guidance systems.⁷

¹ The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, President, Remarks on Afghanistan (Aug. 16, 2021), *available at* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

² *The Importance of and Path to Achieving Mineral Security, and Consideration of S. 1052, The Rare Earth Element Advanced Coal Technologies Act, and S. 1317, The American Mineral Security Act*, 116th Cong. (2019), Questions for the Record at 68.

³ *Id.* at 69.

⁴ Frank Holmes, *Afghanistan is Sitting on a Gold Mine. Literally.*, FORBES (Aug. 30, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2021/08/30/afghanistan-is-sitting-on-a-gold-mine-literally/?sh=184e14107ca8>.

⁵ Julia Horowitz, *The Taliban are Sitting on \$1 Trillion Worth of Minerals the World Desperately Needs*, CNN (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/18/business/afghanistan-lithium-rare-earths-mining/index.html>.

⁶ *Supra* note 4.

⁷ *Id.*

Other resources discovered include: gold, platinum, silver, copper, iron, aluminum, uranium, coal, chromium, lead, zinc, gemstones, talc, sulphur, travertine, gypsum, and marble.⁸ USGS not only mapped Afghanistan's resources, but also provided technical and legal support in an effort to stimulate the mining industry's growth.⁹

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan's natural resources positions them for significant economic gain. The Taliban previously utilized unlawful mining as a source of revenue. Prior to overtaking the Afghanistan government, the Taliban was estimated to profit between two hundred and three hundred million dollars annually from illegal mineral extraction, three hundred times more than the Afghanistan government's revenues from the same industry.¹⁰ Alarming, China, which essentially controls the rare earth elements market, is eagerly prepared to participate in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, under the Taliban's rule.¹¹ This partnership could strengthen China's dominance of the critical minerals supply chain. As demand for these minerals continues to grow, we are concerned that our adversaries will reap the benefits of U.S. research and efforts to develop Afghanistan's natural resources.

Understanding the extent of the Taliban's ability to develop these resources is crucial to ensuring the United States does not inadvertently support global terrorism through the importation of these minerals. Therefore, to assist us with our oversight activities, please produce the following, as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m., September 27, 2021:

1. A document sufficient to describe all the minerals and natural resources the USGS discovered or mapped in Afghanistan.
2. A document sufficient to describe the mining infrastructure in place and capacity to develop mineral resources in Afghanistan.
3. A document sufficient to describe the USGS reports, research, and materials given to Afghan scientists or Afghan officials.
4. A copy of USGS's most recent assessment of Afghanistan.
5. A document sufficient to describe the minerals and respective quantities available in Afghanistan with a comparison of the locations and quantities of those same minerals in the United States.
6. An assessment of USGS's investment in Afghanistan, including but not limited to a return-on-investment analysis, and a success or failure determination of those efforts.

⁸ *Id.*; *Factbox: What Are Afghanistan's Untapped Minerals and Resources?*, REUTERS (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-are-afghanistans-untapped-minerals-resources-2021-08-19/>.

⁹ SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION: QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS (Jan. 30, 2018) at 10.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 8.

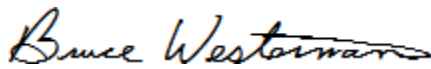
¹¹ *Supra* note 4.

Acting Director Applegate
September 13, 2021
Page 3

Please contact the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Minority staff at (202) 225-2761 with any questions about this request and to coordinate the delivery of your response to room 1329 of the Longworth House Office Building.

An attachment contains additional instructions for responding to this request. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations



Pete Stauber
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Energy and
Mineral Resources

cc: The Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Chair, House Committee on Natural Resources
The Honorable Katie Porter, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
The Honorable Alan Lowenthal, Chair, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
The Honorable John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Enclosure