



May 5, 2022

Chair Joe Manchin  
Senate Committee on Energy &  
Natural Resources  
304 Dirksen Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member John Barrasso  
Senate Committee on Energy &  
Natural Resources  
307 Dirksen Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: Nomination of James D. (David) Applegate as Director of U.S. Geological Survey**

Dear Senators, Manchin, Barrasso, and Committee Members,

We are writing to express our concerns about the nomination of David Applegate to serve as the Director of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). While we are not taking a position in opposition to Dr. Applegate's confirmation, we believe the concerns we raise below should be explored in connection with his confirmation.

The principal basis of our concern is his role as acting USGS Director during a period of ongoing retaliation against USGS scientists who have raised alarms about breaches in biosecurity in USGS wildlife disease laboratories. We believe that the leaders of agencies must send a strong message that whistleblower retaliation will not be tolerated, and Dr. Applegate should make this commitment. Moreover, he should commit to the highest standards of research biosafety, including independent accreditation of USGS laboratories. During his time in USGS leadership, biosafety breaches have resulted in multiple internal and external releases of pathogens that have threatened public health and safety, the environment, and the health of workers and research subjects, as well as the integrity of experimental results.

The two major USGS wildlife disease laboratories, the National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) in Madison, Wisconsin, and the Western Fisheries Research Center (WFRC) in Seattle, Washington, are not subject to external oversight. Unfortunately, USGS's self-regulating status has allowed repeated, serious biosafety breaches and animal care deficiencies to be minimized or glossed over.

These labs are working on emerging diseases of fish, wildlife, and domestic animals. These have included the current SARS-CoV-2 pathogen as well as other serious zoonotic diseases such as avian influenza, West Nile virus, and monkeypox.

In one example of such a breach, for six months a biosafety level two laboratory (BSL-2 lab) at WFRC discharged unfiltered aquatic pathogens, including foreign virus strains, into the wetlands of one of the largest parks within Seattle that adjoins the second largest lake in Washington State. The reason for this breach was that the lab's chlorination system had broken down, but it lacked an alarm to indicate when its chlorine line was clogged, and the chlorination system was not checked for six months.

We are especially concerned by the ongoing retaliation against a long-serving WFRC researcher who revealed these pathogen releases while Dr. Applegate was acting USGS director. Employees at these

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facilities who are aware of the issues/incidents are fearful to report the conditions, especially because those staff members who have stepped forward have been punished.

These USGS labs are 40-50 years old and have been subject to chronic maintenance problems. The resulting equipment breakdowns occur regularly, meaning that the risk of dangerous releases should be a constant management priority rather than an afterthought.

Virtually all other Federal agencies that handle animals obtain independent accreditation, which likely could reduce the risk of future accidental releases of zoonotic pathogens from the wildlife labs, which represents a major concern to the public and decisionmakers in view of the current pandemic.

Yet in response to a March 2021 request by a coalition of wildlife conservation and environmental groups that USGS explore accreditation, acting Director Applegate demurred, asserting that the current USGS investment in biosafety was sufficient.

In summary, we are seeking assurances that confirming Dr. Applegate to serve on a permanent basis to lead USGS will not undermine whistleblower protection, scientific integrity, or the degree of bio-security required to ensure that future USGS wildlife pathogen research is conducted safely.

Sincerely,

Timothy Whitehouse  
Executive Director