

Opening Statement – Ranking Member Bentz
“Promoting Human Rights in International Conservation”
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
October 26, 2021

Thank you for holding this important hearing. It’s my understanding that the effort leading up to this hearing has been truly bipartisan in nature. Performing oversight and demanding government accountability are some of the most important functions of Congress. Today’s hearing is part of that effort.

For the past two and a half years, this Committee has investigated whether taxpayer funds being sent overseas by the Department of the Interior have been used to inadvertently support human rights abusers. In short, that happened. A breakdown occurred where our government and international wildlife conservation organizations failed to follow where - and how - our taxpayer dollars were spent. It’s appalling that American dollars were funding such human rights violations that usually happen in a third-world dictatorship.

The atrocities are too disgusting to repeat, but to its credit, the last Administration’s Interior Department initiated an internal review of its international conservation grants as a result. Upon its review, then-Deputy Interior Secretary Kate MacGregor issued a memo where she determined, in part, that, quote – “additional controls are necessary . . . and no further funding may be awarded until such deficiencies are corrected.” – end quote. I ask unanimous consent to enter that document into the record.

As a result, some of the grant funding was paused in 2019 until such reforms were made. This Administration has released this funding and we are awaiting documentation from the Interior Department to see what, if any, transparency and accountability measures have been put into place. Mr. Chairman, I hope you will join us in making sure we get those documents in a timely manner.

I hope today that we, as a Committee, analyze past failings and examine potential solutions in preventing future atrocities. We have a number of witnesses before us today that will provide a genuine debate to help accomplish this goal.

The Republican witness before us today, Mr. John Knox, a Professor of Law at Wake Forest University, will detail his unique background on this matter and will indicate what additional steps may be necessary.

One such step is that we need to ensure that government agencies – both within the Interior and the State Departments – are following the same process that prohibits financial assistance to recipients who have committed human rights violations.

Without cross-agency coordination and our congressional oversight component, we could find ourselves in the same place again – wondering if and why taxpayer funds supported individuals who committed atrocities.

Not only are future lives at stake, but our taxpayers have asked for and deserve nothing less than us doing our job.

I look forward to our discussion today, and with that I yield back.