

Opening Statement
Chair TJ Cox
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Oversight Hearing
Sexual Harassment at the Department of the Interior
October 30, 2019

The Department of the Interior has a sexual harassment problem. And the problem isn't new. For decades, women—and men—in our national parks, refuges, and other public lands and offices have not been given the protections they need to do their work free from harm. As we sit here, mere weeks after the second anniversary of #MeToo, addressing this problem is as critical as ever.

In 2016, the Inspector General released a report that documented approximately 15 years of systemic sexual harassment and misconduct in Grand Canyon National Park. After that report was released, it was clear that this issue could no longer fall to the wayside. Interior needed to take major action.

The Obama administration sent an anonymous survey out to all of Interior's approximately 70,000 employees—an unprecedented effort in the federal government. The survey was designed to get an idea of whether this was a problem limited to Grand Canyon and the Park Service, or whether it was more widespread.

The findings were alarming—over one third of all Interior employees had been harassed in some way in the past year. And nearly one out of every 10 had been sexually harassed, including both men and women.

These numbers are shocking on their own, but the survey dug even deeper. It found that three quarters of employees who had been harassed chose NOT to file a report or complaint. They gave several reasons, but one of the top reasons was that they didn't think anything would be done about it.

This is unacceptable. Both women and men deserve a workplace in which they feel safe, both physically and psychologically—and in which they believe something will be done if they are put in harm's way.

Fortunately, this administration has taken action—for which they deserve credit. Since the survey was released, Interior has revamped its policy, instituted new training, and required each bureau to draft a regularly updated action plan, among other efforts. These are all steps in the right direction.

But this summer, the Inspector General released a report which highlights ways in which Interior can further strengthen those efforts. I look forward to hearing more about those needed changes and how Interior will dedicate the resources necessary to make those changes.

But I also want to have a frank conversation today. While the right policies, procedures, and training are obviously important, they are only one piece of the puzzle. As we have heard from experts

over and over again, addressing sexual harassment begins, first and foremost, with effective leadership.

Leadership must not only SAY they are committed; they must SHOW that they are. They need to cultivate a culture that promotes diversity and inclusivity across all levels of the workplace, but especially in top leadership and management.

They need to engage those who have been affected by harassment in helping to craft the organization's solutions to the problem.

And perhaps most importantly, leadership needs to earn the trust of its workforce. Employees need to believe that their leaders will support them, stand up for them, and hold wrongdoers accountable.

Unfortunately, that isn't the case at Interior. This administration has been marked by secrecy and distrust. We have seen, time and again, both in the press and in testimony before this Committee, accounts of employees being manipulated, intimidated, and ignored.

Most recently, the Bureau of Land Management abruptly announced it was moving its headquarters out West. Reports of a closed-door meeting with affected employees show that not one of the employees supported this move. One employee even said, quote, "morale is as low as I've ever seen."

At a full committee hearing this summer, a whistleblower from Interior testified that this administration has, quote, "sidelined scientists and experts, flattened the morale of career staff, and by all accounts is bent on hollowing out the agency."

A mass reassignment of Senior employees in 2017 created a culture of fear for stepping out of line.

None of this sounds like leadership that is committed to earning the trust of its workforce. And if workers do not trust that their leaders even value them, how can we expect them to trust that their leaders will protect them in their most vulnerable moments?

Making public statements is easy. But making real change in addressing an issue as challenging as sexual harassment takes trust, engagement, and genuine leadership. We hope Interior's leadership will take that message to heart today.