



PUBLIC EMPLOYEES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY
962 Wayne Ave • Suite 610 • Silver Spring, MD 20910

Testimony for the Record
Submitted to the
U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
For the Hearing
**“All in for America250: Public-Private Partnerships Supporting America’s
Semiquincentennial on our Public Lands.”**
February 10, 2026
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Executive Director
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Dexter and all members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I think we all can agree that America’s 250th anniversary is a national milestone that belongs to all Americans, regardless of political affiliation.

Which is why my organization, and many others, welcomed Congress creating America250, a bipartisan effort to ensure that this commemoration would unite the country, reflect our shared democratic values, and tell a full and honest American story.

But reports¹ that significant amounts of taxpayer dollars intended for this purpose are being diverted to Freedom250, a separate, partisan, private entity, raise serious concerns that demand clear public answers.

¹ Ben Smith, “*Inside the scramble to keep a divided America’s 250th birthday on track*,” Semafor 1/12/26:
<https://www.semafor.com/article/01/12/2026/inside-the-scramble-to-keep-a-divided-americas-250th-birthday-on-track>

The American people are paying for this commemoration. We deserve to know where our money is going—and why.

Last month, the organization I lead, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), sent a letter² to Interior Secretary Burgum seeking answers to some of the pressing questions about this very unusual arrangement.

Specifically, we asked Secretary Burgum:

To disclose how a reported \$100 million in taxpayer funds was diverted from America250 to Freedom250, and how those funds are being used.

At a bare minimum there should be a publicly available budget, clear descriptions of funded activities, identification of contractors or grantees, and an explanation of who has decision-making authority over expenditures.

Second, we asked the Department to clarify whether Freedom250 is raising private funds in addition to receiving taxpayer dollars.

If so, the sources of those funds, the amounts raised, and the rules governing their use must be publicly disclosed. Any private fundraising should be clearly segregated from federal funds and subject to rigorous reporting and auditing requirements to prevent conflicts of interest or undue political influence over a national civic commemoration, or worse.

Lastly, we asked about the role of the National Park Foundation in relation to Freedom250. And specifically, if National Park Foundation funds, staff time, or other in-kind resources are being used to support Freedom250.

² Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility letter to Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, 1/15/26: https://peer.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/1_15_26_Freedom250-Letter-to-Burgum.pdf

If so, the Department should disclose how those contributions are accounted for, whether they were formally approved by the Foundation's board, and how they align with the congressionally-chartered Foundation's charitable mission to support the National Park Service. Staff time and in-kind support represent real costs to the public and must be treated with the same transparency as direct expenditures.

And I want to be clear about one thing. I appreciate the work of the National Park Foundation. But our concern here is that they have been overtaken by partisan forces with no interest in the mission of the Foundation or the wellbeing of our national parks, and a once non-partisan organization is being forced into partisan work.

I have submitted our full letter into the record along with a copy of this testimony.

Taken together, we believe these issues raise very serious concerns about oversight, accountability, and adherence to congressional intent.

The creation of a parallel entity to carry out work similar to America250 blurs accountability, weakens congressional intent, and undermines public trust –trust that is essential if the 250th anniversary is to be a moment of shared reflection rather than division.

The Department of the Interior has the ability to resolve these questions by releasing a full accounting of the funding, disclosing fundraising activities, clarifying institutional roles, ensuring public employees are not being used to promote a private enterprise and explaining how current actions align with the law.

To date, the Department has failed to do so – and has not responded to our letter.

And since we sent our letter, more troubling information about Freedom250 has come to light.

A report this weekend in the New York Times³ showed that Freedom250 is “crafting bespoke packages” for sponsors. Sponsorship tiers begin at \$500,000, including VIP event access and

³ Kenneth P Vogel, Lisa Friedman and David Fahrenhold, “*For \$1million, Donors to U.S.A. Birthday Group Offered Access to Trump,*” New York Times, 2/8/26, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/08/us/politics/freedom-250-trump-donors.html>

speaking roles at the national Fourth of July celebration. For \$2.5 million and up, sponsors get a photo opportunity with President Trump at a private Freedom250 reception.

Another recent press report⁴ indicated that corporations with links to the president or his inner circle – including UFC, Palantir, Oracle, Amazon, and Coinbase – have already signed on as sponsors.

And last month, the CEO of Freedom250 traveled to Davos, Switzerland and solicited⁵ foreign donations to Freedom250.

Department of the Interior employees are now being required to put Freedom250 logos with a link to the Freedom250 website, raising serious concerns about the nonpolitical obligations of government workers under the Hatch Act and their First Amendment rights against compelled speech.

But we still do not have anywhere near a complete picture of who is funding Freedom250, what access or perks or political favors they are getting for their funding or how the money raised is being spent. Nor do we know if public employees are being used to bolster privately funded activities.

And the fact that what little and limited information we do have is being pieced together from various news outlets – and not from government entities – highlights the lack of transparency at the heart of the problem.

A national anniversary loses legitimacy when it appears to be shaped behind closed doors, funded without transparency, or insulated from public scrutiny.

⁴ Dan Friedman and Amanda Moore, “*Trump’s War on History*,” MotherJones March-April 2026: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/02/america-freedom-task-force-250-trump-anniversary-history-smithsonian-kennedy-center/>

⁵ USA House Davos Live Stream on Youtube 1/19/26: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulZDH0Y1d4Q>

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, I would also be remiss if I did not say that all of this is taking place against the backdrop of this Administration, and some involved in the 250th Anniversary celebration, deliberating erasing our nation's history in advance of the 250th anniversary celebration. We have seen reports that the Department of the Interior removed⁶ a slavery exhibit at Independence Park in Philadelphia and also removed⁷ references to historical events such as Japanese internment camps and conflicts with Native Americans at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in New York City.

Erasing history doesn't make it go away, it just makes it more likely to repeat itself. And harkens back to some very dark and dangerous times in world history.

A 250th anniversary celebration should strengthen trust in our democratic institutions, not erode it.

And when it comes to Freedom250, transparency is not a distraction from patriotism. It is one of its most essential expressions.

We hope that the Department of the Interior, and other entities throughout the government, will reverse course and offer a full accounting for how taxpayer funds — our money — are being used as well as full transparency for any and all private funds that are co-mingled with our tax dollars.

And we hope that Congress will continue its oversight role and ensure all activities around the 250th anniversary are in line with congressional intent.

Which is why I am grateful for this hearing and look forward to answering any questions you have.

⁶ Jake Spring, "Park Service removes slavery exhibit at Independence Park in Philadelphia," Washington Post 1/22/26: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/01/22/slavery-exhibit-removed/>

⁷ Jake Spring, "National parks remove signs about climate, slavery and Japanese detention," Washington Post 1/20/26: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2025/09/20/national-parks-climate-change-slavery-purge/>



PEER

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962 Wayne Ave • Suite 610 • Silver Spring, MD 20910

January 15, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
United States Department of Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum,

As we enter the new year and prepare to celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary, we write to raise concerns about the creation and funding of Freedom250 and its relationship to the congressionally authorized America250 celebration.

America's 250th anniversary is a national milestone that belongs to all Americans, regardless of political affiliation, religious viewpoints, or ethnic or racial background. Congress intentionally established America250 as a bipartisan effort to ensure that this commemoration would unite the country, reflect our shared democratic values, and tell a full and honest American story.

As you know Freedom250 was recently established as a Delaware Corporation by the Trump administration and has assumed many of the functions of America 250. We are concerned about [reports](#) that indicate taxpayer dollars earmarked for America 250 are being diverted to Freedom250. This reported transfer raises serious concerns that demand clear public answers. The American people are paying for this commemoration. They deserve to know where their money is going—and what's it's being used for.

First, the Department must disclose how at least \$100 million in taxpayer funds that were diverted away from America250 to Freedom250 are being used. This should include a publicly available budget, clear descriptions of funded activities, identification of contractors or grantees, and an explanation of who has decision-making authority over expenditures at Freedom250.

Second, the Department must clarify whether Freedom250 is raising private funds in addition to receiving taxpayer dollars, including through selling merchandise. If so, the sources of those non-taxpayer funds, the amounts raised, and the rules governing their use must be publicly disclosed. Any private fundraising should be clearly segregated from federal funds and subject to rigorous reporting and auditing requirements to prevent conflicts of interest or undue political influence over a national civic commemoration.

Third, the public deserves clarification regarding the role of the National Park Foundation in relation to Freedom250. Freedom250 is listed as a subsidiary of the National Park Foundation, the official nonprofit partner of the National Park Service. Freedom250 lists its address as that of the National Park Foundation. Washington, DC records indicate that its resident agent is an employee of the National Park Foundation. If National Park Foundation funds, staff time, or other in-kind resources are being used to support Freedom250, the Department should disclose how those contributions are accounted for, whether they were formally approved by the Foundation's board, and how they align with the Foundation's charitable mission. Staff time and in-kind support represent real costs to the public and must be treated with the same transparency as direct expenditures.

Taken together, these concerns point to a broader issue of oversight. The creation of a parallel entity to carry out work similar to America250 is blurring accountability, weakening congressional intent, and undermining public trust. That trust is essential if the 250th anniversary is to be a moment of shared reflection rather than division.

The American people deserve confidence that their money is being used responsibly, lawfully, and in service of an inclusive national commemoration.

The Department of the Interior can resolve these questions quickly if it chooses to. It can release a full accounting of Freedom250's budget, disclose all fundraising activity, clarify the role of the National Park Foundation, and explain—clearly—how all of this aligns with congressional laws and intent regarding America's 250th Anniversary celebration, the use of tax payers dollars, and the mixing of public, private and charitable funds in implementing the President's agenda.

A 250th anniversary celebration should strengthen trust in our democratic institutions, not erode it. Transparency is not a distraction from patriotism. It is one of its most essential expressions.

We look forward to your prompt response and to seeing the Department take concrete steps to restore public trust through openness and accountability.

Sincerely,

Timothy Whitehouse
Executive Director

Cc:

Chairman Lee

Ranking Member Heinrich

Chairman Westerman

Ranking Member Huffman

All members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

All member of the House Committee on Natural Resources