



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

October 5, 2020

The Honorable Dan Brouillette  
Secretary of Energy  
1000 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Secretary Brouillette:

It has come to our attention that political preferences, instead of data and evidence-based science and engineering, may be influencing decisions about the release of Department of Energy research that could help inform public and Congressional discussions about the future of the nation's electric system. Any such research that has been delayed, withheld, or inappropriately modified should be released promptly — along with a full account of why such actions were taken.

As you may be aware, recent reports<sup>1</sup> suggest that policy-relevant research and studies underway within the Department of Energy (DOE) have been altered, delayed, or indefinitely halted — based not on substantive technical or methodological concerns, but what appears to be a desire to suppress scientific results that contradict the Administration's political priorities.

The most notable reported example of politically-motivated suppression of DOE research is the fate of the Interconnections Seam Study (“Seams study”).

As you are aware, the U.S. electrical grid is divided into three distinct interconnections which are largely independent of each other, save a few transmission lines that bridge the “seams” in the grid. This means that only a tiny fraction of the energy generated nationwide every second can actually be transmitted across the country. The Seams study sought to investigate the benefits that strengthening the connections between the grid's interconnections could have for the reliability, resilience, sustainability, and affordability of the U.S electrical system.

The study's preliminary findings<sup>2</sup> showed that expanding and increasing electric transmission capacity across the “seams” in the grid could, on its own, save consumers up to \$3.6 billion per year and eliminate up to 35 megatons of carbon dioxide pollution per year, by 2038. The study also found that a better-connected grid could enable increased competition and greater efficiency

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Fairley, “Who Killed the Supergrid?” and “How a Plan to Save the Power System Disappeared.” InvestigateWest; The Atlantic. August 20, 2020. <https://perma.cc/TQ8C-M89K>; <https://perma.cc/B3AZ-NMTZ>.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Bloom, “Interconnections Seam Study.” NREL. July 26, 2018. <https://perma.cc/6GQ4-DLJP>

in the electricity markets — driving down electricity costs for consumers, spurring the development of renewable energy, and increasing the grid’s ability to ensure that electricity can flow to the regions where it’s needed during an emergency.

The study was conducted at a cost of \$1.6 million by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) and other DOE staff, in partnership with industry and academia. The study’s preliminary findings have been lauded by energy experts, electric industry representatives, and a bipartisan group of governors as rigorous, important research. It has also shaped crucial policy discussions in the Congress, informing the final report of the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.<sup>3</sup>

However, reports indicate that while the study is essentially complete, its release has been indefinitely delayed by Trump Administration appointees — who are said to have deemed its preliminary findings to be too anti-coal, been displeased that it considered the impacts of a potential carbon price, and disapproved of its findings about hypothetical coal plant retirements.

According to reporting by The Atlantic and InvestigateWest, a DOE political appointee flagged these concerns — which reportedly made their way to your office, as Deputy Secretary — in an August 2018 email after viewing a presentation on the study at a technical conference. We have spoken with one of the study’s lead authors, who contemporaneously described what resulted as “significant political blowback at the most senior levels of DOE.”<sup>4</sup>

The study’s preliminary findings were subsequently removed from the NREL website, its authors were reportedly barred from publicly presenting its findings again, and the study itself was reportedly scrubbed of any references to coal plant retirements, carbon pricing, and even the word “carbon.” The release of the study, as well as the submission of an accompanying scientific publication, appear to have been indefinitely delayed.<sup>5</sup>

The past several months have seen wildfires ravage the West, hurricanes strike the Gulf Coast, and powerful storms and floods inundate the Midwest — all in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In these challenging times, we are reminded that the safety, security, and continued prosperity of our nation is made possible by the knowledge and foresight we have gained from impartial scientific research.

This is why we view the actions that have reportedly taken place at the DOE as particularly egregious, and a departure from congressional direction that must be held to account.

Congress will provide oversight when such abuses are found, and we note with appreciation that the House of Representatives recently passed a provision requiring the release of the Seams study.

---

<sup>3</sup> House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. “Solving the Climate Crisis: Congressional Action Plan for a Clean Energy Economy and a Healthy, Resilient, and Just America.” June 30, 2020. p.56.

<https://climatecrisis.house.gov/sites/climatecrisis.house.gov/files/Climate%20Crisis%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Email from NREL study leader, August 22, 2018:

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7040450-EMAIL-Update-From-NREL-August-22-2018.html>

<sup>5</sup> Draft of Seams paper, July 2018:

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7039256-NREL-Seams-Study-v14-Draft-Released-at-Iowa.html>

To that end, we request that you provide answers to the following questions and take action on the following items:

- Provide an explanation for the delay in releasing the finalized study, including:
  - A target date for the expected release of the finalized study
  - A list of the remaining steps required before the release of the finalized study, and a timeline for their completion
  - A description of the work that has occurred on the study since November 2018
  - The date of the last meeting of the Technical Review Committee for the study, and the date of the next scheduled meeting
- Release all draft iterations of the Interconnections Seam Study completed to date
- Respond to accusations of political influence in the delay of the study's release, namely:
  - Did the fact that the study considered the implications of a hypothetical carbon price play any role in the delay of its release?
  - Did the fact that the study models an increase/acceleration in the retirement of coal power plants play any role in the delay of its release?
  - Was it the opinion of the DOE, or its employees, that the study was too anti-coal? If so, did these views play any role in the delay of its release?
- Have any other studies, reports, or research projects been delayed, amended, or stopped, due to disagreements between research findings and political appointees at the DOE?
- Release any emails between political appointees and career staff within the Office of the Secretary, the office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, the Office of Electricity, and NREL, regarding the study and its release, including:
  - An email regarding the study sent by Catherine Jereza, on August 14, 2018, which reportedly expressed concern that the study's findings were anti-coal and dissatisfaction about considerations of the impact of a carbon price
- Provide an explanation of reported suppression of the study's findings, including:
  - The removal of preliminary findings from the NREL website
  - The deletion of power flow visualizations based on the study's work, from the NREL YouTube channel
  - Reports that researchers involved in the study were made to cancel public presentations about its findings, including a peer-reviewed presentation on its findings at a leading energy conference
  - Reports that researchers involved in the study were prevented from submitting an academic paper based on its findings to a peer-reviewed scientific journal
- Allow NREL to restore study-related materials that were removed from its websites

We appreciate your serious attention to this disturbing pattern of reported behavior by political appointees within the Department. We look forward to your expedient, and thorough, response.

Sincerely,



Scott Peters  
Member of Congress



Elissa Slotkin  
Member of Congress