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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6175

June 24, 2015

RYAN JACKSON, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
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Ann Dunkin
Chief Information Officer
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Mail Code: 2810A
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Ms. Dunkin:

For more than a decade, I have called for efforts to improve the integrity of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) grants programs, including EPA's online grants database.¹ While EPA has taken some steps to increase transparency and accountability within the grants program, the current grants database is not user-friendly and lacks significant information about EPA grants. As the nominee to serve as the Assistant Administrator (AA) for the EPA's Office of Environmental Information (OEI), I write to better understand the steps you are taking to ensure success in this role and to memorialize my request for reforms to EPA's online grants database.

At the outset, I am disappointed by your unfamiliarity with EPA's grants database. My Committee staff broached concerns with the grants database at a June 5, 2015, meeting with you, and as did I at your June 11, 2015, nomination hearing. As such, I was surprised by your admitted lack of familiarity with the database at our June 18, 2015, meeting in my office. Although EPA's Office of Administration and Resources Management oversees grants awarded, OEI is responsible for the technology used by EPA including the grants database website. OEI's mission is to "...ensure the quality of EPA's information, and the efficiency and reliability of EPA's technology, data collection and exchange efforts, and access services."² The Office of Information Analysis and Access within OEI "seeks to continuously enhance the public's access to quality environmental data and information."³ Accordingly, as EPA's Chief Information Officer (CIO) since February 2015 and advisor to the Administrator for the last ten months, it would have been fitting for you to work on EPA's grants database.

EPA's grants program constitutes more than 40 percent of the Agency's annual budget⁴ so it is equally important to ensure grant information is publicly available and comprehensive. I have made transparency of EPA's grants program a key focus during my time as the Chairman of the Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW). In 2004, I held an EPW hearing

¹ See Grant Awards Database, Env'tl. Prot. Agency, http://yosemite.epa.gov/oarm/igms_egf.nsf/HomePage?ReadForm (last visited June 24, 2015).

² *About the Office of Environmental Information (OEI)*, Env'tl. Prot. Agency, <http://www2.epa.gov/aboutepa/about-office-environmental-information-oei> (last visited June 24, 2015).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *FY 2015 EPA Budget in Brief*, Env'tl. Prot. Agency, http://www2.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-03/documents/fy15_bib.pdf (last visited June 24, 2015).

entitled “Grants Management at the Environmental Protection Agency” where the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported a lack of specificity in how EPA oversees discretionary grants, a lack of competition among discretionary grants, and a lack of measureable outcomes, along with other issues.⁵ These findings were subsequently compiled into an EPW Majority staff report entitled “Grants Management at the Environmental Protection Agency: A New Culture Required to Cure a History of Problems.”⁶ Ultimately these oversight efforts led to a reorganization of the EPA website as part of an effort to increase transparency and ensure accountability of EPA grants. Moving forward, I want to ensure that the Agency provides the public with comprehensive grants information on its website.

Upon reviewing the EPA grants database, my Committee staff identified several concerns with the current state of the database. According to the grants website, “EPA Grant Awards Database contains a summary record for all non-construction EPA grants awarded in the last 10 years plus grants that were awarded before that time that are still open.”⁷ However, the database does not appear to contain comprehensive information regarding grants awarded by EPA nor does it fully report grants awarded for the last ten years.

As one example, my Committee staff identified a lack of comprehensive information on EPA’s database when conducting oversight of EPA’s grant awards to the environmental activist group, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). According to EPA’s database, the Agency awarded NRDC two grants totaling \$2,332,780 over the last ten years.⁸ Yet, USAspending.gov reports that NRDC received ten grants from EPA totaling \$3,900,950 over the last ten years.⁹ This is a significant difference in the amount and number of grant awards reported, and can be construed as EPA misleading the public on the grants awarded to the NRDC.

Although the Agency has stated that USAspending.gov¹⁰ is the primary way the Agency reports grant awards to the public—there is no mention of or link to USAspending.gov on EPA’s

⁵ *Grants Management at the Environmental Protection Agency*: Hearing before the U.S. S. Comm. on Environment & Pub. Works, 108th Cong. (2004).

⁶ *Grants Management at the Environmental Protection Agency: A New Culture Required to Cure a History of Problems*, U.S. S. COMM. ON ENV’T & PUB. WORKS, Sept. 2004, available at <http://www.epw.senate.gov/repwhitepapers/Grants.pdf>.

⁷ *Grant Awards Database*, Env’tl. Prot. Agency, http://yosemite.epa.gov/oarm/igms_egf.nsf/HomePage?ReadForm (last visited June 24, 2015).

⁸ EPA grants database reports two grant awards to NRDC in amount of \$1,210,105 and \$1,122,675. *All Awards to Non-Profits*, *Grant Awards Database*, Env’tl. Prot. Agency, http://yosemite.epa.gov/oarm/igms_egf.nsf/Reports/Non-Profit%20Grants!OpenView&Start=999&Count=500&Expand=1312#1312 (last visited June 24, 2015).

⁹ USAspending.gov reported that over the last ten years, EPA awarded NRDC ten grants in the amounts of \$394,891; \$353,772; \$399,632; \$374,012; \$367,357; \$383,134; \$418,047; \$418,047; \$400,333; and \$391,725. See <https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/AdvancedSearch.aspx?sub=y&ST=G&FY=2015,2014,2013&A=0&SS=USA&RN=Natural%20Resources%20Defense%20Council>:

<https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/AdvancedSearch.aspx?sub=y&ST=G&FY=2012,2011,2010&A=0&SS=USA&RN=Natural%20Resources%20Defense%20Council>:

<https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/AdvancedSearch.aspx?sub=y&ST=G&FY=2009,2008&A=0&SS=USA&RN=Natural%20Resources%20Defense%20Council>:

<https://www.usaspending.gov/DownloadCenter/Pages/dataarchives.aspx>.

¹⁰ USASPENDING.GOV, <https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/Default.aspx> (last visited June 24, 2015).

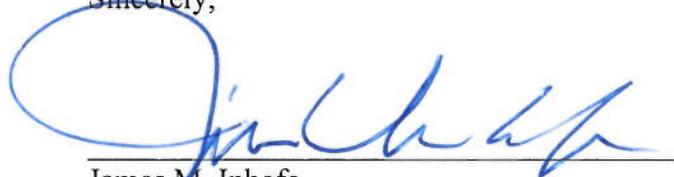
grants website. At a minimum, the information on EPA grants listed on its database should mirror that which is reported by USAspending.gov. Indeed, to the extent EPA is deferring its responsibility to publicly report grants awarded to USAspending.gov, Congress should be duly informed as it could have a bearing on the level of funding the Agency receives to manage its grants database.

Additionally, the database is not user-friendly and certain basic features of “advanced searches” are not working properly. The EPA grants database is not user friendly, especially when searching for specific information. The grants appear in separate lists which are broken down by type such as “all awards to non-profits” or “description of awards,” with different sorting options. However, none of these options leads the user to one location where they can access all the relevant information about a grant. Users instead have to search through multiple lists of grants to attempt to obtain more comprehensive information. Furthermore, features within the “advanced search” are not properly working, making it impossible to search for grants awarded during a specific time period. The database also fails to allow users to sort search results based on the amount of the grant award.

While I understand as CIO you have hired staff to support improvements to the overall EPA website, you were unable to specify the steps the Agency will take or the timeframe for making improvements. Accordingly, my Committee staff identified several initial measures the Agency can take to begin improving the database. These suggestions include: ensuring all grants from the past ten years are, in fact, listed in the database; creating a search box at the top of each search results page; allowing users to sort each column on the search results page; adding a ‘year’ column to the search results page; and providing an alphabetical search menu on the search results page. I request that you consider these suggestions and provide a comprehensive plan to address my concerns with the grants database along with a corresponding schedule for achieving the plan by no later than July 10, 2015.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact EPW Majority staff at (202) 224-6176.

Sincerely,



James M. Inhofe
Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public Works