

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

April 10, 2025

Erik Molvar
Executive Director
Western Watersheds Project
126 S Main Street Suite B-2
Hailey, ID 83333

Dear Mr. Molvar:

The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) is investigating the settlement among Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) ranchers, the National Park Service (NPS), and Western Watersheds Project (WWP), among other environmental groups, announced in January 2025 (settlement).¹ As you are aware, the terms of this settlement remain closely guarded. It is the Committee's understanding that participating ranchers were required to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) as part of their agreement to end agricultural operations at PRNS in exchange for monetary compensation.² The Committee is concerned not only with the lack of transparency surrounding the settlement but also with the environmental and legal consequences the settlement may impose.

Congress established PRNS in September 1962 through Public Law 87-657 (enabling legislation).³ Driven largely by pressure from rising property taxes, local dairymen and ranchers formed an alliance with the Sierra Club in the late 1950s to support the formation of PRNS, primarily to save their livelihoods.⁴ The enabling legislation, originally and as amended, provided the ability to continue existing and historic dairy and ranching operations at PRNS, including unlimited access to roads within the pastoral zone, and ensured continued agricultural operations for food production.⁵

Despite the NPS's ability and duty to continue leasing agricultural properties in PRNS,⁶ environmental groups have targeted PRNS producers for years.⁷ In 2022, your organization, WWP, coordinated with Advocates for the West, the Resource Renewal Institute, and the Center for Biological Diversity (environmental groups) to sue the NPS at PRNS. Previously, in 2016,

¹ See, e.g., John Beck, *Deal announced to end most ranching in Point Reyes National Seashore, manage park's free-roaming elk*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-national-seashore-ranches-deal-nature-conservancy/>.

² *Id.*

³ An Act to establish the Point Reyes National Seashore in the State of California, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 87-657, 76 Stat. 538 (1962).

⁴ See *Ranching History at Point Reyes*, NAT'L PARK SERV., https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/historyculture/stories_ranching.htm.

⁵ An Act to establish the Point Reyes National Seashore in the State of California, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 87-657, 76 Stat. 538 (1962).

⁶ See 16 U.S.C. § 459c-5.

⁷ See, e.g., Aaron Orlowski, *Lessons learned from oyster farm closure*, AQUACULTURE NORTH AMERICA (Feb. 28, 2017), <https://www.aquaculturenorthamerica.com/drakes-bay-shutdown-offers-lessons-for-california-shellfish-1620/>.

WWP and the environmental groups filed suit against NPS, alleging that the then-current general management plan (GMP) was outdated and required updating.⁸

This suit successfully forced NPS to update the GMP through an environmental impact statement (EIS). As you are aware, WWP actively participated in the EIS process. Unsatisfied with the results of a lengthy public and scientific process, WWP and the environmental groups almost immediately sued NPS upon the release of the updated 2021 GMP, which continued to allow for twenty-year agricultural leases within PRNS, but limited housing to families and workers involved in these agricultural operations.⁹

When the 2022 lawsuit was filed, WWP wasted no time in attacking the updated 2021 GMP without any understanding of its purpose. In fact, a representative of WWP stated that NPS “needs to stop authorizing chronic water contamination, harassment and suppression of Tule elk, degradation of public recreation and destruction of native coastal prairies for the sake of a handful of unsustainable ranching operations.”¹⁰ Rather than understand the PRNS enabling legislation’s purpose of facilitating multiple land uses, the environmental groups chose to throw every unsubstantiated preservationist argument at the wall in court and see what stuck.

In reality, PRNS is protected by statute and the NPS has a mandate to govern these lands.¹¹ PRNS is governed by 16 U.S.C. § 459c-5, which allows the Secretary of the Interior to lease federal lands at PRNS for agricultural use. Additionally, Federal Lands have long been governed by multiple use principles, which allow agencies governing public lands to ensure that, “they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people.”¹² PRNS was well within this longstanding multiple use mandate to allow continued agricultural operations. But, more importantly, PRNS was specifically established to protect the livelihoods and lands of ranchers in the area while allowing for multiple use.¹³

Despite the statutory protections for PRNS, PRNS ranchers ultimately settled with WWP, other environmental groups, and NPS following a buyout proposal.¹⁴ Although producers participating in the buyout have publicly expressed hesitation to participate, they have been seemingly muzzled by NDAs limiting what they are permitted to share.¹⁵ These producers have

⁸ Complaint, Resource Renewal Institute v. NPS, No. 3:16-cv-00688 (N.D. Cal. Feb. 10, 2016).

⁹ See, e.g., Richard Halstead, ‘Environmental terrorism’: Point Reyes settlement roils agricultural community, MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL (Jan. 18, 2025), <https://www.marinij.com/2025/01/17/environmental-terrorism-point-reyes-settlement-roils-agricultural-community/>.

¹⁰ See *Lawsuit Challenges Point Reyes Ranching, Elk-Killing Plan*, CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (Jan. 10, 2022), <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/lawsuit-challenges-point-reyes-ranching-elk-killing-plan-2022-01-10/>.

¹¹ See 16 U.S.C. § 459c-5.

¹² See 43 U.S. Code § 1702c

¹³ See *Ranching History at Point Reyes*, NAT’L PARK SERV., https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/historyculture/stories_ranching.htm.

¹⁴ See, e.g., John Beck, *How The Nature Conservancy came to broker a secret deal to end Point Reyes National Seashore’s ranching era*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 29, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-seashore-ranching-nature-conservancy/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

been repeatedly pressured to keep quiet by NPS and other public officials,¹⁶ and have even had activist group representatives show up at their homes in the PRNS.¹⁷

Moreover, because PRNS is statutorily a non-fee-collecting park, most of its proceeds come from existing agricultural operations. Eliminating the bulk of PRNS's revenue sources not only places a heavier burden on taxpayers to support PRNS recreation and wilderness programs but also shifts the burden of fundamental PRNS operations and maintenance away from private agricultural producers. The net result of this shift will likely lead to a ballooning deferred maintenance backlog for PRNS.

As a result of the settlement, NPS announced a Revised Record of Decision (ROD) to the General Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement for PRNS and the North District of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.¹⁸ The revised ROD notably did not include the same notice and comment period as the 2021 updated GMP that instigated this settlement's underlying litigation.¹⁹ As part of the revised ROD and settlement agreement, NPS announced the closure of twelve of fourteen existing multi-generational ranch and dairy operations at PRNS.²⁰ Given your organization's instigation of this litigation matter, the Committee is gravely concerned about WWP's involvement in the future land use planning of PRNS.

Accordingly, to satisfy the Committee's ongoing oversight efforts, please provide the following items in your possession, custody, or control, in electronic format, by April 24, 2025:

1. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund related to any past, current, or pending settlement agreements regarding Point Reyes National Seashore.
2. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, Resources Legacy Fund, the National Park Service, the Point Reyes National Seashore Association (on behalf of all associated ranchers), departing ranchers, remaining ranchers, or non-party ranchers related to any past, current, or pending settlement agreements regarding Point Reyes National Seashore, particularly associated with *Resource Renewal Institute v. NPS*, No. 3:22-cv-145-MMC (N.D. Cal.).

¹⁶ Telephone communications with the Committee.

¹⁷ *Id.*; see also, e.g., John Beck, *How The Nature Conservancy came to broker a secret deal to end Point Reyes National Seashore's ranching era*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 29, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-seashore-ranching-nature-conservancy/>.

¹⁸ See *Point Reyes National Seashore Announces Revised Record of Decision for General Management Plan Amendment and Settlement Agreement on the Management of Ranching on Park Lands*, NAT'L PARK SERV., <https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/news/newsreleases-20250108-gmp-amendment-revised-rod-and-settlement-agreement.htm>.

¹⁹ See, e.g., John Beck, *Deal announced to end most ranching in Point Reyes National Seashore, manage park's free-roaming elk*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-national-seashore-ranches-deal-nature-conservancy/>.

²⁰ *Id.*

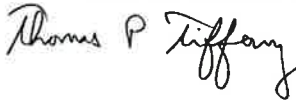
3. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund regarding fundraising, logistics, advertising, or organizing related to ceasing agricultural operations or otherwise resolving land use conflicts at Point Reyes National Seashore.
4. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund and the National Park Service related to agricultural operations or land use conflicts at Point Reyes National Seashore.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the requests from the Committee on Natural Resources. Please contact the Majority staff for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee at (202) 225-2761 or HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions. Under House Rule X, the Committee on Natural Resources has "general oversight" of any matter relating to its jurisdiction, including the National Park Service and federal lands. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources



Tom Tiffany
Chairman
Subcommittee on Federal Lands



Mike Collins
Member of Congress



Doug LaMalfa
Member of Congress



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Lauren Boebert
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Mike Ezell
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