



RAUL RUIZ, M.D.
Member of Congress
36th District of California

Congress of the United States
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April 1, 2021

The Honorable Darryl LaCounte
Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Department of the Interior
1849 C St NW
Washington, DC, 20240

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C St NW
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Haaland and Director LaCounte,

I am writing to express my extreme concern over the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) oversight of ongoing public hazards in my district. In an effort to appropriately address this issue, I am requesting a full accounting of the BIA's interactions and oversight of the Oasis Mobile Home Park (OMHP), located on Tribal land in Thermal, California.

For the past year and a half, my office and I have been working with local BIA officials in Riverside County to remedy two public health threats to my constituents. The circumstances leading up to these incidents and the response of local officials has been unacceptable, and I am gravely concerned about their ability to protect my constituents and the people living on Tribal lands in my district going forward.

First, in September 2019, my office discovered that the local BIA office had been aware of an unpermitted waste facility located on Tribal land for nearly five years and had failed to take the appropriate steps to stop the trespassing business. Repeated fires at the Sun Valley Recycling Center (SVRC) sent several nearby children to the hospital and cancelled classes at local schools for over a week. Following repeated requests from my office, the BIA eventually shut down SVRC and is currently cleaning the site. It should not have taken a crisis for the law to be enforced.

Second, since August 2019 the Oasis Mobile Home Park has been under an Emergency Order from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) after arsenic levels nine-times the legal limit were found in the drinking water system. Recently, it came to my attention that OMHP may be operating without an approved business lease from the BIA. I am concerned the BIA may have allowed the OMHP to operate without a lease for at least fifteen years, subjecting residents to unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. Reports from a 2007 visit by the BIA as part of the business lease approval process showed multiple deficiencies and risk factors present in the wells and water distribution systems. It is unclear to me how the Southern California BIA Office can

reasonably state that OMHP ownership is working to come into compliance when clear violations and substandard conditions have existed for well over a decade.

In October 2019, I convened a meeting with the EPA, Riverside County officials, BIA Regional Director Amy Dutschke and BIA Southern California Superintendent Javin Moore to discuss these two incidents. During that meeting, both BIA officials assured me and my staff that while they were concerned about the issues at OMHP, they did not have jurisdiction to affect the situation.

Given the recent revelations about the BIA's involvement in the lease application process for OMHP, it is clear that the information provided that day was false, or misleading at best. In addition, the failure to disclose past interactions related to the OMHP owner's business lease – despite discussing a similar issue regarding SVRC mere minutes prior – is extremely concerning and erodes my confidence in the ability of local BIA authorities to be thorough, forthcoming, and diligent in the execution of their duties.

It is absolutely unacceptable that more than 18 months after the start of this local public health crisis the BIA has only now revealed its past involvement. This series of events, coupled with the inaction that led to the SVRC fires, leads me to question what other potential hazards under the BIA's jurisdiction remain within my district.


I respectfully request written responses to the following questions by April 21st, 2021:

- 1) When did Scott Lawson, the owner of the Oasis Mobile Home Park, apply for a business lease to operate the park? Has a business lease ever been approved for Scott Lawson and/or the OMHP?
- 2) When did the BIA first conduct a site visit at OMHP? Please also note the date of any subsequent visits. Please provide copies of any documentation detailing those visits and any documentation of actions taken as a result.
- 3) Was the BIA Southern California Superintendent and/or the Pacific Regional Director aware of the status of Scott Lawson's business lease for the OMHP as of October 9, 2019?
- 4) What is the BIA's policy for approving a business lease application for a housing business that is under an EPA order for a drinking water violation?
- 5) Did the BIA ever contact Scott Lawson (or associates) with regard to his business lease application during the period from August 31, 2019 to March 29, 2021? If so, what was the nature of that contact?
- 6) If no business lease has been approved, has the BIA ever issued a notice of violation and/or trespass to Scott Lawson? If yes, please identify and describe any facts or circumstances associated with such notice(s).

- 7) What steps has the BIA taken since the initial OMHP business lease application to bring Scott Lawson into compliance with health and safety standards in his pursuit of a business lease?
- 8) Has the BIA at any point considered legal action with regard to the lack of a business lease at OMHP? Why, or why not?
- 9) Should substandard conditions be identified at OMHP during a future site visit by the BIA, what steps will the BIA take to protect the residents of OMHP?
- 10) How has the BIA sought to protect the health and safety of the residents of OMHP?
- 11) Please provide a list of all outstanding business lease applications on Tribal land in Riverside County, California. Please annotate this list by business type, date of initial application, and any notices or actions taken against individuals in violation of their lease agreement or in trespass.

Thank you for your attention to this critical and serious matter. I look forward to your response and to rectifying this egregious and dangerous situation.

Sincerely,


Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress