

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 11, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 2024

Dear Secretary Hegseth and Secretary Burgum:

We are writing to express our profound concern over the politically motivated, uncoordinated, unscheduled, and opaque water releases that occurred between January 31 and February 2, 2025, when the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) dramatically increased the amounts of water flowing from Terminus Dam at Lake Kaweah and Schafer Dam at Lake Success. We fear that these releases were conducted to placate the President’s vow to “open up the valves” to bring more water to Los Angeles to combat the devastating wildfires—which had already been 100% contained by that point.

Federal records show that over three days, more than two billion gallons were released from the reservoirs. This is water that should have been saved for critical water needs and summer irrigation for farmers that could have irrigated 6,000 acres of agricultural trees for an entire year. Instead, this water was left to evaporate in a dry lake bed, sacrificing vital resources in a drought-prone state, seemingly for the appearance of taking action to fight the already contained fires in Los Angeles.¹

There has been extensive reporting documenting how these sudden, unplanned releases were done with minimal notice and coordination.² Local water managers were caught off guard by the decision, and in some cases, they were given just a few hours of advance notice. This lack of coordination is entirely unprecedented given the Corps’ established flood safety rules, as outlined in Chapter 5 of the water control management manual ([ER 1110-2-240](#)), which require communication and coordination with stakeholders and the general public.

More recent reporting has revealed that the Corps *knew* that the water could not be delivered to Southern California directly, and that doing so would have required several steps of coordination with local, state, and federal agencies to bring the water through a rarely used connection point.³ Despite knowing how much coordination would have been necessary to actually deliver the water to Southern California, the Corps failed to conduct the necessary outreach to other agencies with enough advance warning to actually make the releases successful in achieving the purported purpose.

¹ <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1885473025476145386>

² Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2025-01-31/trump-california-dams-opened-up>

³ Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2025/03/07/trump-water-release-california-fires/>

Further, during a Congressional hearing in February, a Corps official was unable to answer basic questions about what had happened with the water releases, repeatedly stating, “I don’t know what happened to the water once it was released from the dams.”⁴ We are very concerned by the apparent lack of clear direction with which these releases were conducted.

In light of these issues, we respectfully request that you promptly provide answers to the following questions no later than March 21, 2025.

1. Deviation from Flood Safety Operating Rules

- Who specifically gave the order to breach established flood safety rules for water releases? When was it given and why was it given? Did President Trump—or anyone in the White House—directly order the Corps to carry out these releases? Additionally, please detail the Department of Government Efficiency’s involvement in these efforts, if any.

2. Coordination with Local Authorities

- Please provide the specific steps taken in advance to coordinate these releases with state and local government officials, local water managers, agricultural stakeholders, and public safety officials, including a list of all parties that were contacted prior to these releases, when they were contacted, and by whom they were contacted.

3. Impact on Water Usage

- What are the objectives the release of this water are supposed to achieve and how will it be used to achieve those objectives? What considerations were made about the impact of these releases on critical municipal and agricultural water supply needs later this year? What considerations were made considering current drought protections and decreased snowpack estimates for the region? How will these releases meet their intended uses when it is likely that much of the released water will be lost to evaporation rather than put to beneficial use? What plan is in place to replenish the water supplies lost from this release?

4. Future Release Plans

- Are similar actions being considered moving forward, and if so, what assurances can be provided that full coordination with local and state agencies will be maintained?

It is vital that decisions related to water management be transparent and properly coordinated to best serve the American people. Going forward, before your Departments act, we demand that you take all necessary steps to protect public safety, support our nation’s water needs, and comply with all applicable laws.

Sincerely,

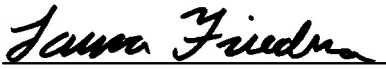
⁴ Appropriations Committee Oversight Hearing – State of the Civil Works Program, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FM9fW5d4P6g&t=1125s>



Mike Levin
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Laura Friedman
Member of Congress

CC:

Lieutenant General William H. "Butch" Graham, Jr., Chief of Engineers and Commanding General, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

David Palumbo, Acting Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation