

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

DEMOCRACY FORWARD FOUNDATION,
P.O. Box 34553
Washington, D.C. 20043,

Plaintiff,

vs.

Case No. 25-cv-

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240,

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240,

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE,
1849 C Street N.W.,
Washington, DC 20240

U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive
Reston, VA 20192

Defendants.

COMPLAINT FOR INJUNCTIVE RELIEF

Plaintiff Democracy Forward Foundation (“DFF”) brings this action against Defendants U.S. Department of the Interior (“DOI”), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“FWS”), National Park Service (“NPS”), and U.S. Geological Survey (“USGS”) to compel compliance with the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (“FOIA”). Plaintiff alleges as follows:

Jurisdiction and Venue

1. This Court has jurisdiction over this action pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B) and 28 U.S.C. § 1331.

2. Venue is proper under 28 U.S.C. § 1391(e), as at least one of the Defendants' headquarters are located in Washington, D.C., within this district, and a substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise to Plaintiff's claims occurred here.

Parties

3. Plaintiff Democracy Forward Foundation ("DFF") is a not-for-profit organization incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia and based in Washington, D.C. Plaintiff works to promote transparency and accountability in government, in part, by educating the public on government actions and policies.

4. Defendant U.S. Department of the Interior ("DOI") is a federal agency within the meaning of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(f)(1), and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. DOI has possession, custody, and control of records to which Plaintiff seeks access.

5. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS") is a component of DOI and a federal agency within the meaning of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(f)(1), and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. FWS has possession, custody, and control of records to which Plaintiff seeks access.

6. National Park Service ("NPS") is a component of DOI and a federal agency within the meaning of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(f)(1), and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. NPS has possession, custody, and control of records to which Plaintiff seeks access.

7. The U.S. Geological Survey ("USGS") is a component of DOI and a federal agency within the meaning of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(f)(1), and is headquartered in Reston, Virginia. USGS has possession, custody, and control of records to which Plaintiff seeks access.

Facts

8. DOI, through its components including FWS, NPS, and USGS, terminated a number of grants for non-profits in September and November 2025 citing a misalignment between the non-profits' awards and agency priorities.

9. On September 23, 2025, the date that the vast majority of these grants were terminated, the Daily Caller published an article reporting that, “[t]he DOI cancelled numerous grant awards...with several groups that also happened to proclaim diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) values, which Trump has regularly critiqued.”¹

10. This article was amplified on the X accounts of DOI Secretary Doug Burgum and the Department of Government Efficiency (“DOGE”).²

11. DFF filed FOIA requests to shed light on the communications and guidance surrounding the termination of these grants within DOI.

Daily Caller Communications Request

12. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to DOI seeking the following:

All electronic communications (including emails, email attachments, complete email chains, calendar invitations, calendar invitation attachments, text messages, or messages on messaging platforms, including Signal, WhatsApp, Slack and Microsoft Teams, and direct messages on social media platforms such as X and Truth Social) between (a) anyone communicating on behalf of the DOI's Office of Communications and (b) external individuals or

¹ Audrey Streb, *EXCLUSIVE: Trump Admin Axes Millions in Grants to Several DEI-Tied Environmental Organizations*, Daily Caller (Sep. 23, 2025), <https://perma.cc/8F9A8VEN>.

² Secretary Doug Burgum (@SecretaryBurgum), X (Sep. 23, 2025 at 4:12 PM), <https://perma.cc/D2MV-FGKY>; Department of Government Efficiency (@DOGE), X (Sep. 24, 2025 at 7:20 PM), <https://perma.cc/M5UK-9MVB>.

domains listed below:

External Individuals and Domains

1. @dcnf.org
2. @dailycaller.com
3. Audrey Streb (audreystreb@dcnf.org)

13. This request sought records from August 12, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

14. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002545.

15. On January 5, 2026, DOI sent DFF a formal acknowledgement letter about this request, assigning it to the Normal track.

16. DFF has not received any further communication from DOI regarding this request.

DOI Guidance and Directives Request

17. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to DOI seeking the following:

All final guidance, directives, or memoranda circulated within the Department of the Interior regarding the review of grants originating within DOI and its components from January 20, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

18. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002546.

19. On January 5, 2026, DOI sent DFF a formal acknowledgement letter about this request, assigning it to the Normal track.

20. DFF has not received any further communication from DOI regarding this request.

Grant Termination Communications Request

21. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to DOI seeking the following:

All electronic communications (including emails, email attachments, complete email chains, calendar invitations, calendar invitation attachments, text messages, or messages on messaging

platforms, including Signal, WhatsApp, Slack and Microsoft Teams, and direct messages on social media platforms such as X and Truth Social) sent by any official involved in the termination of the grants listed below on September 23, 2025 (except otherwise noted).

Grants

(a) Institute for Applied Ecology

- a. F22AC02755
- b. F22AC02868
- c. F23AC02247
- d. F24AC00880
- e. F24AC01432
- f. F24AC01549
- g. F25AC00611
- h. F25AC00644
- i. P22AC00734
- j. P22AC00747
- k. P24AC00089
- l. P24AC01154
- m. P24AC02224
- n. L22AC00347
- o. L22AC00351
- p. L22AC00446
- q. L23AC00134
- r. L23AC00272
- s. L23AC00339
- t. L23AC00418

(b) Institute for Bird Populations

- a. D24AC00430 - Terminated on November 19, 2025
- b. L21AC10420
- c. L22AC00194
- d. L23AC00124
- e. P21AC10259
- f. P22AC02259
- g. P23AC00841
- h. P23AC02338
- i. P24AC02430
- j. P25AC00257

(c) Mid-Klamath Watershed Council

- a. F22AC02668

- b. F23AP02864
- c. F23AC02292
- d. F24AC02782
- e. F24AP02347
- f. F24AP00910

In an effort to accommodate DOI and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, we have limited this request to communications sent by officials involved in the termination of the specified grants on September 23, 2025. To be clear, however, DFF still requests that complete email chains and texts be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both an official's response to an email and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

22. This request sought records from January 20, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

23. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002547.

24. On January 5, 2026, DOI sent DFF a formal acknowledgement letter about this request, assigning this request to the Complex track.

25. DFF has not received any further communication from DOI regarding this request.

FWS Guidance Request

26. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to FWS seeking the following:

All final guidance, directives, or memoranda circulated within and/or provided to the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the review of grants originating within DOI and its components from January 20, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

27. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002548.

28. On January 16, 2026, FWS emailed DFF granting DFF's fee waiver request, assigned the request to the Complex track, and provided an estimate date of determination of

August 17, 2026.

29. DFF has not received any further communication from FWS regarding this request.

NPS Guidance Request

30. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to NPS seeking the following:

All final guidance, directives, or memoranda circulated within and/or provided to the National Park Service regarding the review of grants originating within DOI and its components from January 20, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

31. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002550.

32. DFF has not received any further communication from NPS regarding this request.

USGS Guidance Request

33. On December 12, 2025, DFF sent a FOIA request to USGS seeking the following:

All final guidance, directives, or memoranda circulated within and/or provided to the United States Geological Survey regarding the review of grants originating within DOI and its components from January 20, 2025, through September 23, 2025.

34. On December 12, 2025, DOI sent an automated acknowledgement email about this request and assigned it tracking number DOI-2026-002551.

35. On December 16, 2025, USGS emailed DFF granting DFF's fee waiver request, assigned the request to the Normal track, and provided an estimate date of determination of January 13, 2026.

36. On January 14, 2026, USGS emailed DFF stating USGS is coordinating with another federal agency and are still awaiting a response to our request. USGS provided a new estimated determination date of February 27, 2026.

37. DFF has not received any further communication from USGS regarding this

request.

Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

38. As of the date of the Complaint, Defendants have failed to notify DFF of determinations regarding DFF's requests. Through Defendants' failure to respond within the time limits required by law, DFF has constructively exhausted administrative remedies.

CLAIM FOR RELIEF

Count 1 (Violation of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552)

39. Plaintiff incorporates by reference the foregoing paragraphs as though fully set forth herein.

40. By failing to respond to Plaintiff's requests with determinations and prompt productions of responsive records within the statutorily mandated time period, Defendants have violated their duties under 5 U.S.C. § 552, including but not limited to, their duties to conduct a reasonable search for responsive records, to take reasonable steps to release all nonexempt information, and to not withhold non-exempt portions of responsive records.

REQUEST FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff requests that this Court:

1. Order Defendants to conduct searches for any and all responsive records to Plaintiff's FOIA requests using search methods reasonably calculated to lead to discovery of all responsive records;
2. Order Defendants to produce, by a date certain, any and all non-exempt responsive records and a *Vaughn* index of any responsive records withheld under a claim of exemption;

3. Enjoin Defendants from continuing to withhold any and all non-exempt responsive records;
4. Award Plaintiff its costs, attorneys' fees, and other disbursements for this action; and
5. Grant any other relief this Court deems appropriate.

Dated: February 9, 2026

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Anisha Hindocha

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