

November 30, 2020

President-elect Joseph Biden  
Vice President-elect Kamala Harris  
1401 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris,

Congratulations on your historic election victory. As Native American women in leadership positions who are also mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sister and aunties, we finally feel like we can breathe again. Your campaign's Federal Indian policy statement is the most comprehensive and meaningful we have ever seen, and we are grateful for your unwavering support of tribal sovereignty and the betterment of American Indian/Alaska Native people.

In our capacity as American Indian/Alaska Native women serving in national, state, and tribal leadership, as well as Native tribal organizational positions, we are writing to urge that you nominate Congresswoman Deb Haaland as Secretary of the Department of Interior (DOI).

When you promised to appoint Cabinet level positions that reflect the diversity of our country, we believed you, because we know you. We understood your words to be a solemn vow that American Indian and Alaska Native people of this nation – the only historically under-represented group in the United States that has yet to be represented in a cabinet level position -- would finally have a seat at the only table in the United States government that matters.

As a man of extraordinary integrity, we know you will stay true to your word, which is why we write today to join the euphony of more than 110 tribal leaders, 50 Members of Congress, and scores of environmental and climate change leaders and organizations who have voiced their support of Rep. Deb Haaland to serve as your Secretary of Interior.

Rep. Haaland is uniquely qualified for this position. Having made history as one of the first two Native American women elected to Congress, Rep. Haaland is a proven leader whose resume reflects the journey of a gifted politician whom people of all backgrounds want to follow. Earning her J.D. in 2006, Rep. Haaland's political career had humble beginnings, spending years as a campaign volunteer. Eventually hired by the Obama Campaign, she also served as the Native American Caucus Chair for the Democratic Party of New Mexico. Rep. Haaland's work resulted in the largest voter turnout of Native Americans in the history of New Mexico at that time; the Native American vote in New Mexico is largely credited with having secured President Obama's victory in New Mexico in 2012.

In 2014 she proved that her leadership gifts extend far beyond the reach of Indian country, when she won the Democratic primary for Lieutenant Governor in the State of New Mexico and later served as the Chair of the Democratic Party of New Mexico. In our tribal communities, American Indian women are the backbone. So, it is no surprise that while in the midst of her political work, she was simultaneously raising her family and working as the first Chairwoman elected to the

Laguna Development Corporation Board of Directors, overseeing business operations of the second largest tribal gaming enterprise in New Mexico, and in the crucial position of Tribal Administrator.

As a new Member of Congress, Rep. Haaland was immediately recruited for House leadership positions. She served as Vice Chair of the House Committee on Natural Resources and as Chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, immersing herself in the work of the Department of Interior as the only member of that Committee whose life is directly impacted by the DOI. Other leadership positions she has held include serving on the Subcommittee for Indigenous People of the United States; Co-Chair of the Native American Caucus; Vice Chair of the Democratic Women's Caucus; Vice Chair of the Equality Caucus; Vice Chair on Families and Children Living in Poverty for the Majority Leader Task Force on Poverty and Opportunity and she was elected into the Freshman Leadership position on the Democratic Caucus Steering and Policy Committee.

Yet beyond her imminent qualifications, it is perhaps her character and lived experience – that which is not in her resume - that we find most compelling for her candidacy as your nominee to Secretary of Interior. Rep. Haaland is a true Warrior Woman, raised in the warrior tradition by parents who served in the armed forces. She is a traditional woman who has worn her indigenous Laguna Pueblo identity on her sleeve and has fought for the rights of tribal governments and Native people her entire life.

Unlike most Interior Secretaries over the past 170 years, she is neither a former Governor or Senator of a western state nor is she a corporate executive, who have all had a stranglehold on the Secretary of Interior position since 1849. She does not come from a family of means or power, she has lived in poverty, and is the only candidate for this position who has the experience of living on an Indian reservation as an indigenous woman whose daily life is impacted by the Secretary of Interior.

While the majority of cabinet nominees in our nation's history tend to come from more privileged backgrounds and have climbed higher on the political leadership ladder, Rep. Haaland had to hike to the top of the mountain to reach the first rung of the ladder. She has actually walked the path of those she will have jurisdiction over.

While most candidates for this nomination in the past looked at the Interior Secretary position and saw vast acres of public lands and water resources, Rep. Haaland looks at the position and first sees people – people whose lives are most impacted by the DOI and who are vastly under-represented in the Department as a whole.

No other cabinet secretary beyond Interior has a pervasive cradle-to-grave legal and trust responsibility extending to any other group of people. The reach of the DOI over our lives extends far beyond the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education. Every day, decisions are made or actions undertaken by all DOI bureaus and offices that affect our children, elders, communities and lives. This includes the management and leasing of our lands, our economic development, tribal sovereignty, law enforcement and public safety, our Treaty rights, access to clean water, our food security, management of our trust funds, our plants, animals, fish and birds

and even our religious freedom. Yet throughout most of the past 170 years, the Secretary of Interior has overseen the exploitation of our people.

Rep. Haaland will be ready to lead Interior on Day One. While many others have had to be introduced to the concept of tribal sovereignty and learn about us, or worse -- just viewing American Indian tribes and people as a footnote within the scope of their mission -- Rep. Haaland is one of us. There will be no learning curve for her. She will undertake all other duties of DOI Secretary with equal passion and attention and carry out your climate change agenda with a strength of heart, resolve and leadership that no other candidate can match. As an indigenous earth mother, Rep. Haaland's love of our lands and resources includes a spiritual connection going back to time immemorial that is unique to Native Americans.

For some of us who are signatory to this letter, your choice for Secretary of Interior will be the ninth Interior Secretary we have worked with as tribal leaders and advocates in Indian Country. We know from experience that the best cabinet secretaries are as good as their immediate advisors who surround, advise and follow them. True leadership requires listening to the experts and the scientists and requires the ability to inspire. Rep. Haaland is inspirational to all who meet her and will lead the DOI with heart and integrity.

Objectively, it should be stunning that a Native American has never been appointed to lead DOI until now, which is an unfortunate reflection of the bias, white privilege and structural racism that is so endemic in our systems of government in the United States, and which you have committed to dismantling wherever possible.

We are women leaders of Indian country, but we are also mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts of our Native Nations. We have spent over 10,000 years on these lands. Through the eyes of our grandmothers, great grandmothers and their grandmothers before them, we have watched for 170 years while the Secretary of Interior as our "trustee" fail to protect our lands and break every single treaty it ever made with tribes.

We watched our trustee commit genocide against our people. We watched as our trustee allowed the allotment and theft of 2/3 of our lands; the carving up of our reservation homelands; the theft of our lands to create National Parks and Wilderness areas; the murder of innocent women and children at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee. the kidnapping of our children as young as 4 years old to boarding schools hundreds of miles from our homes. We watched as the trustee allowed mining on our lands and contamination of our water; the depletion of our fisheries; and the termination of 106 federally recognized tribes from 1953-1970; the flooding of our reservations to build dams for cities downstream, the taking of our grazing lands by the BLM; the mismanagement of billions of dollars of our trust fund monies and much more recently, the roll-back of policies created to protect our lands and waters.

As President-Elect, you have an historic opportunity to change the trajectory of history by nominating Rep. Haaland as Interior Secretary. We invite you, Mr. President-Elect, to join us in solidarity at this celebratory moment in time which is has finally come and which is ours as earth mothers and elected leaders of our people.

We fight for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. We fight for the land and water. We fight for justice and the rights of all. We fight for the dreams of our little girls. But mostly we fight for the rights of all Native Americans to finally have a seat at that table that will only reflect the diversity of America if one of our own is sitting there with you.

We wish you well as you carry out your transition and look forward to working with you and Senator Harris as President and Vice President of the United States.

Sincerely,



Cong. Sharice Davids (D-KS)



Melanie Benjamin, Chair/Chief Executive, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe & Co-Founder of Women Empowering Women For Indian Nations (WEWIN)



Susan Masten, Co-Founder of Women Empowering Women of Indian Nations – WEWIN



Lucy Simpson, Exec. Dir. National Indian Women's Resource Center (in personal capacity)



Elizabeth Carr, Sr. Native Affairs Advisor, National Indian Women's Resource Center (in personal capacity)