

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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September 27, 2023

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations

Dear Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree:

We write to you to express our concern over Section 466 in H.R. 4821, the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2024. If enacted, this provision would prevent any FY2024 funds to “implement, administer, or enforce Public Land Order 7921 (relating to the withdrawal of public land for satellite calibration in Railroad Valley; Nye County; Nevada).” We believe that enactment of this provision would have negative consequences for agencies and industries in the Science Committee jurisdiction, among other entities, because it would severely hinder the calibration processes essential to the operations of Earth-observing satellite systems by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the commercial remote sensing industry. We therefore strongly oppose this provision and urge you to remove it when this legislation comes to the House Floor.

Earth observing satellites collect data that help scientists better understand the Earth’s major systems—the atmosphere, land, oceans, ice, and biosphere—and form the foundation of scientific understanding of the drivers and impacts of climate change. Such data are not only for scientists, however; decisionmakers in civil, national security, and commercial sectors rely on the datasets and tools from Earth-observing satellites for a wide range of applications, including weather forecasting, disaster response and recovery, farmland management, and aviation safety.

According to NASA, the dry lakebed found at the Railroad Valley site has unique surface characteristics that make it the only location in the United States that meets the necessary criteria for the continuous calibration of instruments on board Earth-observing satellites, including those

used by NASA, other federal agencies, international partners, and commercial remote sensing companies. NASA has used the Railroad Valley site for post-launch satellite instrument calibrations since 1993 to maintain the accuracy and precision of the data. Permanent alteration of the surface would destroy those characteristics.

In response to an application from NASA originally submitted in April 2019, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced the withdrawal of approximately 22,684 acres—about 40%—of the Railroad Valley lakebed from new mineral entry for twenty years on April 26, 2023.¹ It is our understanding that NASA only pursued a land withdrawal after decades of reliance on the Railroad Valley site without one because of growing interest in using the site for new activities. Such activities are expected to significantly alter the site's surface features, making it unusable for satellite calibration by NASA, commercial remote sensing companies, and other Federal government agencies.

We respectfully urge you to reconsider Sec. 466 of the Interior-Environment FY2024 bill and support its removal to ensure protection of the surface features of the Railroad Valley site for the continued calibration of Earth-observing satellite instrument data in the interest of scientific research, public safety, national security, and the U.S. economy. Our respective staff are available to discuss our concerns in more detail and to coordinate on this matter. Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue.

Sincerely,



Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



Doug Lamborn
Member of Congress

¹ Public Land Order, No. 7921. Available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/04/27/2023-08916/public-land-order-no-7921-withdrawal-of-public-land-for-satellite-calibration-in-railroad-valley-nye>

cc: The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Frank D. Lucas
Chairman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology