

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2025

The Honorable Chris Wright
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Wright,

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is taking a chainsaw to U.S. nuclear security and nonproliferation efforts with no appreciation for the consequences of its actions. First, DOGE allowed individuals without proper clearances to gain access to Department of Energy (DOE) information systems. Then, DOE terminated National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) staff without understanding or appreciating their critical nuclear security role, quickly rehiring them as its mistake became apparent. Now, we understand that DOGE canceled two DOE lab programs that support efforts to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Any one of these blunders would be troubling and unacceptable but collectively they reflect a pattern of irresponsible behavior and exemplify the profound dangers of applying a “go fast and break things” approach to an organization responsible for the safety and security of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This must stop. Some of us have written to you previously to express our concerns, and we once again urge you to restore the necessary staff and programs and ensure the prioritization of nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation.

On February 20, 2025, some of us wrote to you concerning mass firings at NNSA, but your reply failed to address our concerns. The terminations were not just a bureaucratic misstep, as you have implied, but created an unprecedented and self-inflicted crisis that disrupted the agency charged with safeguarding the nuclear stockpile. According to reports, NNSA requested a national security exemption from these terminations, but you denied it, reportedly because DOE and DOGE did not understand the agency’s critical role in managing the nation’s nuclear arsenal.¹ You later admitted that you “probably moved a little too quickly” and “made mistakes on layoffs in NNSA” before being forced to reverse course and scramble to rehire employees with critical expertise.² In your response to the February 20 letter that some of us sent, you allege that, prior to these firings, you evaluated “each position encumbered by a probationary employee for immediate impacts to national security and public safety.” If this were true, why would DOE scramble to undo most of those firings immediately? These contradictions demand answers.

Further, DOE has yet to clarify how many employees were actually fired. Your response to the February 20 letter that some of us sent claims 177 employees were terminated (150 of which were immediately rehired) yet press reports place the number closer to 350.³ These discrepancies raise serious concerns and call into question DOE’s transparency and decision-making process. On top of that, recent reports indicate more than

¹ Geoff Brumfiel, *Trump firings cause chaos at agency responsible for America's nuclear weapons*, NPR (Feb. 14, 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/14/nx-s1-5298190/nuclear-agency-trump-firings-nnsa>.

² Evan Halper & Hannah Natanson, *How DOGE detonated a crisis at a highly sensitive nuclear weapons agency*, Washington Post (Mar. 2, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/03/02/doge-nuclear-worker-firings-musk-trump/>

³ Tara Copp & Anthony Izaguirre, *Trump administration tries to bring back fired nuclear weapons workers in DOGE reversal*, AP (Feb. 16, 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/nuclear-doge-firings-trump-federal-916e6819104f04f44c345b7dde4904d5>.

130 employees took DOGE's offer to resign.⁴ Reportedly, the NNSA has now lost highly specialized personnel, including at least 27 engineers, 13 program or project analysts, 12 program or project managers, and five scientists. A key biochemist and engineer responsible for enforcing safety and environmental standards at the Pantex Plant, where nuclear warheads are assembled, were among those fired.⁵ The exodus of staff with top-secret Q clearances who handle the secure transport of nuclear materials and oversee nuclear weapons maintenance projects is not just an administrative setback—it is a reckless gamble with national security.⁶

Regarding the cancelled lab programs, according to press reports, the DOE suspended two programs (at national labs in Brookhaven, NY and Oak Ridge, TN) that provide U.S. financial aid to inspectors at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), undermining President Trump's own goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.⁷ Secretary of State Marco Rubio said during his confirmation hearing in January that a nuclear-armed Iran "cannot be allowed under any circumstances."⁸ Although one of the programs reportedly has been restored (at Oak Ridge), DOGE's actions have undermined an effort that for decades has exposed Iran's progress toward the ability to produce nuclear weapons. As a former director of the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory in New Mexico put it: "These are disastrous policies. They go against science and partnerships that lift a nation."⁹ We share these concerns and fear that the disruptions will scare away talented professionals from the field of nuclear nonproliferation and hinder the global fight against the spread of nuclear arms.

As in the case of the NNSA terminations, it is unclear whether DOE and DOGE officials understand key facts — here, the depth of the relationship between the United States and the IAEA. U.S. financial support helps the IAEA train its inspectors, who can go where U.S. government experts may not be welcome. IAEA inspectors have exposed Iran's nuclear progress and helped prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear material.¹⁰ Additionally, the assistance helps place U.S. citizens in staff positions at the IAEA. According to Laura Holgate, a former U.S. ambassador to the IAEA: "These programs enhance U.S. security. This is not charity. It's in our self-interest."¹¹ DOE and DOGE need to understand this.

Given the gravity of DOE's nuclear security and nonproliferation failures and the potentially devastating consequences, we request written answers to the following questions by April 4, 2025:

1. Why did you initially deny the NNSA's request for a national security exemption from the mass firings at the agency?
 - a. Who conducted the analysis that came to this determination?
 - b. What made you realize that you had to reverse your decision?
2. In your response to the February 20, 2025 letter that some of us sent, you allege that, before the firings, you evaluated "each position encumbered by a probationary employee for immediate impacts to national security and public safety."

⁴ Sharon Lafraniere, Minh Kim & Julie Tate, *Doge Cuts Reach Key Nuclear Scientists, Bomb Engineers and Safety Experts*, N.Y. Times (Mar. 17, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/17/us/politics/federal-job-cuts-nuclear-bomb-engineers-scientists.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ William J. Broad, *Atomic Detectives Who Inspect Iran Sites Are Affected by Trump's Aid Freeze*, N.Y. Times (Mar. 8, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/science/trump-nuclear-inspectors-aid-freeze.html?searchResultPosition=18>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Jon Wolfsthal & Laura S. H. Holgate, *Cutting Funding to the IAEA Is a Horrible Idea*, Foreign Policy (Mar. 27, 2017), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/403/27/cutting-funding-to-the-iaea-is-a-horrible-idea-trump-budget-nuclear-iran/>.

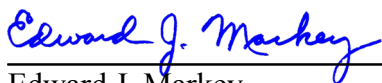
¹¹ William J. Broad, *Atomic Detectives Who Inspect Iran Sites Are Affected by Trump's Aid Freeze*, N.Y. Times (Mar. 8, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/science/trump-nuclear-inspectors-aid-freeze.html?searchResultPosition=18>.

- a. Please explain the discrepancies in the number of fired NNSA employees, ranging from less than 50 to 177, to more than 300, and closer to 350. How many of the terminated NNSA employees declined to return? How has this impacted mission readiness?
 - b. What criteria were used to determine that these positions were not critical to national security?
 - c. Who conducted the analysis that came to the determination that firing these vital employees had no negative impact? Please provide an unclassified version of this analysis.
 - d. What risk assessment, if any, was performed before these individuals were terminated?
 - e. Why did DOE immediately reverse 150 of its purported 177 firings?
3. We understand that approximately 30% of the NNSA employees initially terminated were from the Pantex Plant in Texas, the facility responsible for safely dismantling thousands of retired nuclear weapons.¹² What measures were taken to assess the impact of these terminations on critical national security functions at this facility?
4. Why did DOE and DOGE suspend the two programs at Brookhaven and Oak Ridge national labs that provide U.S. financial assistance to inspectors at the IAEA? When these programs were suspended, did you realize that they supported nonproliferation efforts?
- a. How did you come to realize that you needed to reverse the decision on Oak Ridge?
 - b. How long was the program suspended and what impact did the suspension have?
 - c. Why have you not reversed the decision on Brookhaven? How long has the program been suspended and what impact will the suspension have?
 - d. What other programs within your purview that are involved with nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation are candidates for suspension?

DOE and DOGE's repeated incompetence at NNSA is one of the most reckless national security failures of the Trump administration to date. National security cannot be subjected to this impulsive, uninformed decision-making. We urge you to stop it before the results are catastrophic.

We look forward to your prompt response to our questions.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator




Peter Welch
United States Senator

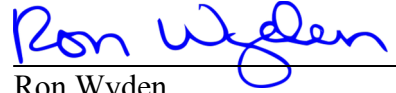


John Garamendi
Member of Congress

¹² Tara Copp & Anthony Izaguirre, *Trump administration tries to bring back fired nuclear weapons workers in DOGE reversal*, AP (Feb. 16, 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/nuclear-doge-firings-trump-federal-916e6819104f04f44c345b7dde4904d5>



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator