

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 18, 2025

Craig Burkhardt
Acting Under Secretary of Commerce for Standards and Technology
National Institute of Standards and Technology
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20899

Dear Acting Under Secretary Burkhardt,

We write to seek clarity and information on what appears to be the unauthorized dismantling of the Hollings Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) Program. If the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) continues its current trajectory of refusing to provide MEP Centers their congressionally mandated funding, 65,000 American manufacturers will lose critical services and resources after December 31, 2025.¹ This is an unacceptable and completely avoidable outcome, and we call on you to rectify this immediately.

On April 1, 2025, the Administration began withholding and delaying funds Congress already enacted and appropriated for MEP Centers. Since then, NIST and the Administration have put the future of the MEP Program in deep uncertainty with its ever-shifting chronology of statements and actions. This uncertainty has already caused roughly 90% of MEP Centers to conduct layoffs or freeze hiring, with some at risk of entirely shutting down.² Our offices are also deeply troubled by reports that the Administration has issued Reduction in Force (RIF) and possible separation notices to every MEP employee. These actions disregard Congress's explicit statutory direction to fully fund the MEP Program and its Centers in all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

The MEP Program under the Department of Commerce (DOC) and NIST has long enjoyed broad bipartisan, bicameral support for its success as a national network of go-to experts that help small and medium-sized manufacturers enhance productivity and adopt advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence.³ Congress first authorized MEP in the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 and reauthorized the program in the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. Recent legislation demonstrates Congress's ongoing support for MEP Centers, as both the House and Senate Fiscal Year 2026 Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations bills provide \$175 million for MEP. The House report specifically supports "continuation of current State awards that bolster the local manufacturing economy."⁴ Additionally, the Senate report clearly directs that "no funds are provided to execute or plan for a program that reduces the number of active MEP Centers" and that "any revamp, including the one outlined in the June 2025 renewal documents, should not proceed without consultation and approval from the Committee."⁵

¹ Briefing for Senate Staff on the Status of MEP, *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025).

² *Id.*

³ Cramer, Dave, "MEP at 30 – Looking Back at the Four Eras of Manufacturing", *National Institute of Standards and Technology*, (Aug. 23, 2018); <https://www.nist.gov/blogs/manufacturing-innovation-blog/mep-30-looking-back-four-eras-manufacturing>.

⁴ Report, "Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2026", *United States House of Representatives*, (Sep. 12, 2025); <https://www.congress.gov/119/crpt/hrpt272/CRPT-119hrpt272.pdf>.

Without consulting with Congress, NIST sent brief letters to ten MEP Centers on April 1, 2025, informing them that their funding would not be renewed. The only justification the Administration provided these Centers was the conclusory assertion that “funding of MEP centers is no longer in alignment with advancing the priorities of NIST.”⁶ The letter stated that NIST was instead “reprioritizing its funding and staff” to support efforts in “critical and emerging technologies – such as artificial intelligence, quantum information science.”⁷ On April 8, 2025, Senator Cantwell and a number of our Senate Democratic colleagues sent a letter to Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick urging him to protect the MEP program and the small and medium-sized manufacturers who rely on it.⁸ The letter highlighted how NIST found that eliminating federal support would undermine decades of domestic manufacturing resilience.⁹

On April 15, 2025, the Administration claimed to reverse course when Congressional offices were notified that NIST had “determined to renew the funding for these 10 Centers through the end of the fiscal year” after “further review and consideration.”¹⁰ This claim was reiterated on May 8, 2025, in a letter to an MEP manufacturing client stating NIST would “renew the funding” for the impacted MEP Centers, emphasizing that “Bringing manufacturing back to this country is one of this Administration’s highest priorities.”¹¹ However, it appears the Administration soon reversed course yet again—back to the original one—with Secretary Lutnick signaling his intent to discontinue the MEP program during a June 4, 2025 Senate Appropriations Committee hearing. While testifying, Secretary Lutnick claimed the MEP program was “outdated” and said the “new technology is AI driven, automated.” When asked about how to best support manufacturers with accessing technology, he suggested “reexamine[ing] and retool[ing]” programs instead of “continuing a program that’s decades and decades old.”¹²

Three weeks after Secretary Lutnick’s testimony, NIST notified 11 MEP Centers with a July 1, 2025 start date that their funding would come with new, mandatory conditions, which included sunsetting their program the following fiscal year because “NIST does not expect to receive additional appropriated funding for MEP beyond what is currently available.”¹³ The Centers were told they could spend only one-twelfth (one month) of their award until they revised and signed

⁵ Report, “Departments of Commerce and Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2026”, *United States Senate*, (Jul. 17, 2025); <https://www.congress.gov/committee-report/119th-congress/senate-report/44/1?outputFormat=pdf>.

⁶ Briefing Handout, “Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events, Addendum B (Letter from NIST to MEP Center)”, *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Letter to Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick from Senators Maria Cantwell, et. al., (Apr. 8, 2025); <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/308E9115-98C9-4EAE-8B64-4F720F76348C>.

⁹ Press Release, “MEP Economic Impacts Boost Business and Jobs”, *National Institute of Standards and Technology*, (Mar. 20, 2025); <https://www.nist.gov/news-events/news/2025/03/mep-economic-impacts-boost-business-and-jobs>.

¹⁰ Briefing Handout, “Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events”, *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff (p. 3 quoting Email “Subject: 4/15 Update: MEP Renewal Update).

¹¹ Briefing Handout, “Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events (Addendum C, May 8 letter from Craig Burkhardt to Robert Altman)”, *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff.

¹² Hearing, “A Review of the President’s Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request for the Department of Commerce”, *Senate Committee on Appropriations*, (Jun. 4, 2025); <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/a-review-of-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2026-budget-request-for-the-department-of-commerce>.

agreements that included the Administration's new demands. Although multiple Centers did attempt to submit these agreements, NIST has yet to approve any of them, which has left these Centers without federal funding for several months.¹⁴ NIST also failed to release a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for a subsequent tranche of Centers until December 4, 2025, which has put the Centers more than six months behind schedule and guarantees a gap in their federal funding after their planned January 1, 2026 start date.

Compounding matters, on October 10, 2025, during the federal government shutdown, you sent messages to MEP employees eliminating their positions due to a supposed lack of funding. You wrote the MEP program "is not consistent with the Secretary's priorities" and that employees would "no longer be in [their] current position."¹⁵ Furthermore, you informed employees it was possible they would be "separat[ed] from Federal Service" going forward, and you asked them to "submit an updated resume" to determine if they would soon be fired.¹⁶

Most recently, on November 25, 2025, the Administration informed five states with a January 1, 2026, start date that NIST would "provide your NIST MEP Center with one year of eligible renewal funding" while NIST and the Department "evaluates plans for the MEP program overall."¹⁷ While this would be a positive development for those states if and when they receive their overdue funding, you also told the remaining eight states with a January 1 start date "there's no clarity from the Secretary for what they want to do" with their MEP Centers.¹⁸ All the other states with MEP Centers apparently share this lack of clarity or concrete information about their future. Earlier this month, the Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a report that specifically highlighted the initial announcement in April to end funding and concluded: "Although funding was later restored through the end of FY25, uncertainty about the program's future still exists."¹⁹ This ongoing uncertainty about MEP's future is entirely unnecessary, and could be swiftly addressed if the Administration chose to do so.

It is perplexing why the Administration appears to believe a program specifically designed to strengthen domestic manufacturing would be at odds with its priorities. MEP serves over 600,000 small or medium manufacturers, representing 98% of all U.S. manufacturing firms.²⁰ Although President Trump has promised a "manufacturing boom,"²¹ the United States lost

¹³ Briefing Handout, "Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events", *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff (p. 4 quoting Notice of Award).

¹⁴ Briefing Handout, "Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events", *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); (p. 6)

¹⁵ Briefing Handout, "Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events (Addendum G October 10, 2025 email from Burkhardt to MEP employee)", *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Email from Rao, G. Nagesh, MEP Acting Director to MEP reps from SD, KY, NE, FL, and RI.

¹⁸ Briefing, NIST Acting Director with MEP Center representatives, (Nov. 20, 2025).

¹⁹ Report, "Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Commerce in Fiscal Year 2026", *Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General*, (Dec. 1, 2025); https://www.oig.doc.gov/wp-content/OIGPublications/OIG-26-003_TMC_FY_2026_SECURED-1.pdf.

²⁰ Infographic, "Manufacturing Statistics 2025", *Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy* (Mar. 10, 2025) https://advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Manufacturing-Infographic-Series_FINAL.pdf

²¹ Press Release, "President Trump Continues to Drive an American Manufacturing Boom", *The White House*, (Oct. 15, 2025); <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/10/president-trump-continues-to-drive-an-american-manufacturing-boom/>.

12,000 manufacturing jobs in August 2025 alone, which nonpartisan analysts have attributed to the Administration's policies.²² We should not be undermining or eliminating a long-standing program that strengthens innovation, enhances global competitiveness, and creates jobs in U.S. manufacturing.

To provide clarity and certainty about the Administration's intentions for the MEP program, please provide the following information no later than January 5, 2026.

1. A list of all MEP Centers with current funding expiration dates and renewal status.
2. The amount and timing of federal disbursements to each MEP Center for FY 2025 and FY 2026.
3. The Department's justification for any planned RIF or staff separation notices within the MEP network.
4. The current organizational structure of the MEP Program, including reporting lines and responsible officials.
5. A timeline for release of the NOFO for the January 2026 and March 2026 renewal cohorts.

Additionally, please provide a briefing to our staff on the status of the MEP Program and the Department's plans for program continuity no later than January 5, 2026.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

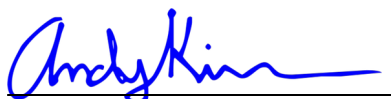
Sincerely,



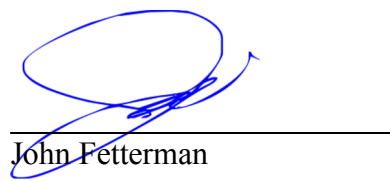
Maria Cantwell
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Andy Kim
United States Senator



John Fetterman
United States Senator

²² Cerullo, Megan, "The U.S. is losing thousands of manufacturing jobs, analysis finds", *CBS News*, (Oct. 1, 2025); <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jobs-manufacturing-trump-tariffs-economy/>.



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Elissa Slotkin
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



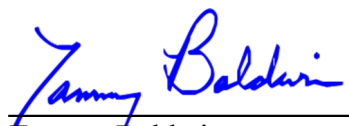
Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator




Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



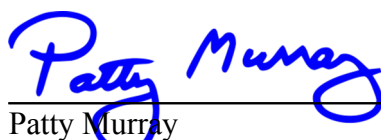
Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



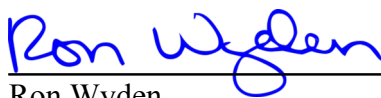
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



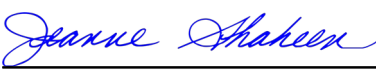
Patty Murray
United States Senator



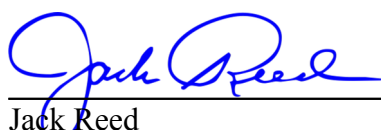
Ruben Gallego
United States Senator



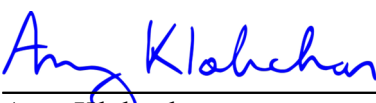
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



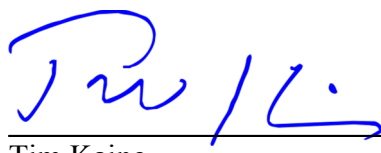
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



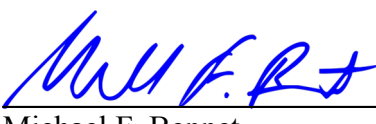
Jack Reed
United States Senator




Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

Cc. The Honorable Howard Lutnick, Secretary of the Department of Commerce