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United States Senate
 COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
 AND TRANSPORTATION
 WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125
 WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

December 12, 2025

Ben Kochman
 Deputy Administrator
 Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration
 U.S. Department of Transportation
 1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
 Washington, DC 20590

Deputy Administrator Kochman:

The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) plays a critical role in ensuring the safe movement of hazardous materials through states, cities, and neighborhoods. Pipeline and hazardous materials incidents can have devastating impacts on communities, the environment, and the economy, which is why the agency must remain independent and vigilant. Just last month, a leak in the Olympic Pipeline in Everett, Washington prevented jet fuel from reaching Seattle-Tacoma International Airport—nearly preventing planes from taking off during the Thanksgiving holiday. This incident underscores why I am concerned by recent reporting indicating you personally spearheaded the rollback of several safety initiatives at PHMSA—and that you did so at the behest of your former employer, the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America (INGAA). This not only raises serious questions about your compliance with federal ethics rules;¹ it indicates the agency is quietly pursuing a reckless safety rollback agenda that will benefit INGAA and weaken the pipeline safety regulations that protect the American public. Accordingly, I am requesting documents and information regarding your actions and the extent to which INGAA may be exercising undue influence over PHMSA.

Since President Trump appointed you acting Administrator of PHMSA in January 2025,² you have signed at least 23 notices proposing or implementing amendments to safety rules—many of which seek to rollback important safety and incident reporting requirements.³ According to a recent investigative report by *ProPublica*, you initiated at least four of these actions in response to requests or specific concerns raised from your former employer, INGAA,⁴ where you were employed as the Director of Pipeline Safety Policy for nearly four years.⁵ For instance, when you

¹ See, e.g., 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502.

² Ogozalek, Sam, “DOT Announces Over a Dozen Political Appointees,” *Politico Pro*, (Jan. 31, 2025); <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/01/dot-announces-over-a-dozen-political-appointees-00201895>.

³ Coburn, Jesse, “How Trump’s Transportation Department Is Loosening Safety Rules Meant to Protect the Public,” *ProPublica*, (Nov. 20, 2025); <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-dot-regulation-safety-rollback-sean-duffy>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ “Deputy Administrator,” *PHMSA*, (accessed Dec. 10, 2025); <https://www.phmsa.dot.gov/about-phmsa/leadership/deputy-administrator>.

proposed changes to the safety waiver process to limit the types of safety conditions agency experts can require when pipeline operators seek a waiver from the standard safety rules,⁶ you specifically pointed to INGAA's critique of PHMSA's special permit process to justify this change.⁷ In another one of your proposed rule changes, you cited comments INGAA submitted in 2023 to justify PHMSA potentially easing repair and inspection requirements.⁸ What you failed to acknowledge, however, was that *you had personally signed for and submitted* these comments on INGAA's behalf.⁹

As an August 2023 report from the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratories points out, "waiving regulatory requirements increases risk."¹⁰ These risks can be offset by alternative safety requirements, some of which are not "directly" related to the pipeline safety requirement being waived. But at the apparent behest of your former employer, you made the decision to propose limiting the judgment of experts to maintain safety when pipeline operators are asking to waive safety requirements. And you cited comments you personally submitted for INGAA to justify a proposal to reduce repair and inspection standards for INGAA member companies. All of this raises serious concerns about whether you are complying with federal recusal obligations—and whether PHMSA is pursuing industry's agenda instead of one that protects the American public.

Your efforts to roll back safety requirements are especially concerning against the backdrop of the 98 percent decline in proposed enforcement penalties assessed by PHMSA on pipeline companies that violate safety rules under your watch.¹¹ By all accounts, you are letting industry rewrite the rulebook, while simultaneously choosing not to enforce the rules that remain.

Given these serious questions and concerns, please provide the following documents and information from January 20, 2025, to present:

1. All communications between you and INGAA, the INGAA Foundation, or any of their member companies. This includes, but is not limited to, all communications regarding or relating to:
 - a. Potential rulemakings;
 - b. PHMSA policies;
 - c. Enforcement cases;
 - d. Your recusal obligations or potential conflicts of interest.

⁶ Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Docket No. PHMSA-2025-0135; Amdt. No. 190-22, (July 1, 2025); <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/07/01/2025-12132/pipeline-safety-rationalize-special-permit-conditions>.

⁷ *Id.*; see also INGAA Comments in Response to DOT RFI 5.5.25(16562500.2), (May 5, 2025); <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/DOT-OST-2025-0026-0872>.

⁸ Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Docket No. PHMSA-2025-0019, (May 21, 2025), footnote 13; <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/05/21/2025-09078/pipeline-safety-repair-criteria-for-hazardous-liquid-and-gas-transmission-pipelines#citation-7-p21717>.

⁹ See Comments on Gas Pipeline Leak Detection and Repair NPRM Docket No. PHMSA-2021-0039, submitted by Ben Kochman for the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America, (Aug. 16, 2023); <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/PHMSA-2021-0039-26287>.

¹⁰ Oak Ridge National Laboratory, "PHMSA Special Permit Review," (Oct. 27, 2023); <https://www.phmsa.dot.gov/sites/phmsa.dot.gov/files/2023-10/ORNL%20PHMSA%20Special%20Permits%20Review%202023.pdf>.

¹¹ See *supra* n. 3.

2. A complete list of every meeting or event (virtual or in person) in which you have participated with INGAA, the INGAA Foundation, or any of their member companies. Please specify the date, location, attendees, and subject matter discussed for each such meeting or event.
3. A complete list of all regulatory actions PHMSA has taken that cite to or rely on any comments, data, or other inputs provided by INGAA or the INGAA Foundation while you were employed by INGAA.
4. A complete list of all matters from which you have sought to recuse yourself.
5. Copies of all waivers or authorizations you have received from PHMSA or DOT authorizing you to work on matters involving INGAA or its member companies.
6. A complete list of every rule, regulation, memo, or guidance that you have approved or recommended approval to the Office of the Secretary.
7. A complete list of PHMSA enforcement cases where the penalty was reduced, deferred, or withdrawn, and the legal rationale for each such instance.

Please provide the above requested materials no later than January 5, 2026.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Cc: Judy Kaleta, Department of Transportation Designated Agency Ethics Official