

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

April 10, 2025

Jennifer Morris  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Nature Conservancy  
4245 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 100  
Arlington, VA 22203-1606

Dear Ms. Morris:

The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) is investigating the settlement among Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) ranchers, the National Park Service (NPS), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC),<sup>1</sup> among other environmental groups, announced in January 2025 (settlement).<sup>2</sup> As you are aware, the terms of this settlement remain closely guarded. Participating ranchers were required to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) related to their agreement to end their agricultural operations at PRNS in exchange for compensation.<sup>3</sup> The Committee is concerned not only with the lack of transparency surrounding the settlement but also with the environmental and legal consequences the settlement may impose.

Congress established PRNS in September 1962 through Public Law 87-657 (enabling legislation).<sup>4</sup> Driven largely by pressure from rising property taxes, local dairymen and ranchers formed an alliance with the Sierra Club in the late 1950s to support the formation of PRNS, primarily to save their livelihoods.<sup>5</sup> The enabling legislation, originally and as amended, provided the ability to continue existing and historic dairy and ranching operations at PRNS, including unlimited access to roads within the pastoral zone, and ensured continued agricultural operations for food production.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the NPS's ability and duty to continue leasing agricultural properties in PRNS,<sup>7</sup> environmental groups have targeted PRNS producers for years.<sup>8</sup> In 2022, environmental groups Renewal Resource Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, and Western Watersheds Project (environmental groups) openly joined this effort by suing the NPS at PRNS. In 2016, the environmental groups filed suit against the NPS, alleging the then current general management

<sup>1</sup> As part of the settlement, TNC is responsible for compensating the PRNS ranchers.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., John Beck, *Deal announced to end most ranching in Point Reyes National Seashore, manage park's free-roaming elk*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-national-seashore-ranches-deal-nature-conservancy/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> An Act to establish the Point Reyes National Seashore in the State of California, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 87-657, 76 Stat. 538 (1962).

<sup>5</sup> See *Ranching History at Point Reyes*, NAT'L PARK SERV., [https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/historyculture/stories\\_ranching.htm](https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/historyculture/stories_ranching.htm).

<sup>6</sup> An Act to establish the Point Reyes National Seashore in the State of California, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 87-657, 76 Stat. 538 (1962).

<sup>7</sup> See 16 U.S.C. § 459c-5.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Aaron Orlowski, *Lessons learned from oyster farm closure*, AQUACULTURE NORTH AMERICA (Feb. 28, 2017), <https://www.aquaculturenorthamerica.com/drakes-bay-shutdown-offers-lessons-for-california-shellfish-1620/>.

plan (GMP) was outdated, and required updating.<sup>9</sup> After the environmental groups successfully forced the NPS to update the GMP and actively participated in the process, they then turned around and again immediately sued the NPS when they were not happy with the results, as the updated 2021 General Management Plan continued to allow for twenty year agricultural leases within the PRNS, but limited housing to families and workers involved in these agricultural operations.<sup>10</sup>

Pursuant to PRNS's enabling legislation, the Secretary of the Interior retains the right to lease federal lands at PRNS for agricultural use,<sup>11</sup> irrespective of the environmental groups' lawsuit outcome. These environmental groups have a well-documented history of targeting ranching families at PRNS. Nevertheless, TNC chose to intervene and insert itself into ongoing confidential mediation.<sup>12</sup>

Although the final terms of the settlement agreement have not been explicitly disclosed, several public reports indicate that, following the settlement, only two of the remaining ranchers will continue operating at PRNS and TNC raised between \$30 million and \$40 million to buy out the other existing historic operators.<sup>13</sup> Although producers participating in the buyout have publicly expressed hesitation to participate, they have been muzzled by NDAs limiting what they are permitted to share.<sup>14</sup> These producers have been repeatedly pressured to keep quiet by NPS and other public officials,<sup>15</sup> and have even had TNC representatives show up at their homes in the PRNS.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the Committee understands that not only are some parties uncomfortable with the settlement agreement, but also that TNC donors and environmental advocates have expressed displeasure with the settlement. These donors and advocates have specifically raised concerns to you, TNC's CEO, related to the consequences of losing PRNS ranches.<sup>17</sup> According to documents in the Committee's possession, these significant concerns include increased wildfire risk, decreased biodiversity, drastic shrinking of the local agricultural economy, and housing loss for local agricultural workers.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, because PRNS is statutorily a non-fee collecting park, most of its proceeds come from existing agricultural operations. Eliminating the bulk of PRNS's revenue sources not only immediately places a heavier burden on taxpayers to support PRNS recreation and

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<sup>9</sup> Complaint, Resource Renewal Institute v. NPS, No. 3:16-cv-00688 (N.D. Cal. Feb. 10, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Richard Halstead, 'Environmental terrorism': Point Reyes settlement roils agricultural community, MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL (Jan. 18, 2025), <https://www.marinij.com/2025/01/17/environmental-terrorism-point-reyes-settlement-roils-agricultural-community/>.

<sup>11</sup> See 16 U.S.C. § 459c-5.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., John Beck, *How The Nature Conservancy came to broker a secret deal to end Point Reyes National Seashore's ranching era*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 29, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-seashore-seashore-ranching-nature-conservancy/>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Telephone communications with the Committee.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*; see also, e.g., John Beck, *How The Nature Conservancy came to broker a secret deal to end Point Reyes National Seashore's ranching era*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 29, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-seashore-ranching-nature-conservancy/>.

<sup>17</sup> Electronic communications on file with the Committee.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

wilderness programs, but also simultaneously shifts the burden of fundamental PRNS operations and maintenance away from private agricultural producers, likely leading to a ballooning deferred maintenance backlog for PRNS.

Resulting from the settlement, NPS announced a Revised Record of Decision (ROD) to the General Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement for PRNS and the North District of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.<sup>19</sup> The revised ROD notably did not include the same notice and comment period as the 2021 General Management Plan that instigated this settlement's underlying litigation.<sup>20</sup> As part of the revised ROD and settlement agreement, NPS announced both the closure of twelve of fourteen existing multi-generational ranch and dairy operations at PRNS and a forthcoming opportunity to issue a "cooperative agreement and lease option to TNC enabling TNC and NPS to collaborate on natural resource restoration projects where ranching will end."<sup>21</sup> Given that TNC is a settlement party and specifically fundraised to buy out existing agricultural operations at PRNS,<sup>22</sup> the Committee is gravely concerned about TNC's conflicts of interest related to the future management of PRNS.

Accordingly, to satisfy the Committee's ongoing oversight efforts, please provide the following items in your possession, custody, or control, in electronic format, by April 24, 2025:

1. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund related to any past, current, or pending settlement agreements regarding Point Reyes National Seashore.
2. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, Resources Legacy Fund, the National Park Service, the Point Reyes National Seashore Association (on behalf of all associated ranchers), departing ranchers, remaining ranchers, or non-party ranchers related to any past, current, or pending settlement agreements regarding Point Reyes National Seashore, particularly associated with *Resource Renewal Institute v. NPS*, No. 3:22-cv-145-MMC (N.D. Cal.).
3. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund regarding fundraising, logistics, advertising, or organizing related to ceasing agricultural operations or otherwise resolving land use conflicts at Point Reyes National Seashore.

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<sup>19</sup> See *Point Reyes National Seashore Announces Revised Record of Decision for General Management Plan Amendment and Settlement Agreement on the Management of Ranching on Park Lands*, NAT'L PARK SERV., <https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/news/newsreleases-20250108-gmp-amendment-revised-rod-and-settlement-agreement.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., John Beck, *Deal announced to end most ranching in Point Reyes National Seashore, manage park's free-roaming elk*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-national-seashore-ranches-deal-nature-conservancy/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., John Beck, *How The Nature Conservancy came to broker a secret deal to end Point Reyes National Seashore's ranching era*, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT (Jan. 29, 2025), <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/point-reyes-seashore-ranching-nature-conservancy/>.

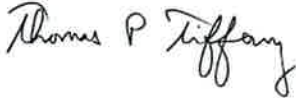
4. All documents and communications among or between The Nature Conservancy, Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, or Resources Legacy Fund and the National Park Service related to agricultural operations or land use conflicts at Point Reyes National Seashore.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the requests from the Committee on Natural Resources. Please contact the Majority staff for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee at (202) 225-2761 or [HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov](mailto:HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov) with any questions. Under House Rule X, the Committee on Natural Resources has "general oversight" of any matter relating to its jurisdiction, including the National Park Service and federal lands. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman  
Chairman  
Committee on Natural Resources



Tom Tiffany  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands



Mike Collins  
Member of Congress



Doug LaMalfa  
Member of Congress



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Lauren Boebert  
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Mike Ezell  
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