



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

October 15, 2024

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Ms. Heather Gottry
Designated Agency Ethics Official
U.S. Department of the Interior Ethics Office
1849 C Street, NW, MS 5311
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Mark Lee Greenblatt
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W. - Mail Stop 4428
Washington, D.C. 20240

Mr. David Alspach
Departmental Records Officer
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., MS 7145A
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland, Inspector General Grenblatt, DAEO Gottry, and Mr. Alspach,

Almost immediately upon assuming office, the Biden-Harris administration expressed a “commitment...to bring transparency and truth back to government.”¹ Inherent in that statement is a commitment to adherence to federal records laws and preserving records that are essential for the American public to learn how the government operates and who are making the decisions that affect their lives.

Protect the Public’s Trust (PPT) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ethics in government and restoring the public’s trust in government officials.

During the Biden-Harris administration, Protect the Public’s Trust has received, and continues to receive, information about the behavior of political appointees at the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) that calls into question the dedication of Department leadership to adhering to and enforcing ethical standards. DOI employees, including political appointees, are also required to preserve the Department’s federal records. It is incumbent upon the Department and its leadership to ensure compliance with these obligations.

Background

The requirement to preserve federal records extends to information provided on the Department’s official government social media accounts. Recent media reports raise doubts over whether the Department is properly monitoring and enforcing these

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/01/20/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-january-20-2021/>



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requirements. For instance, a recent news article described how former Department of the Interior official Tyler Cherry spent Sunday June 23, 2024 and Monday June 24, 2024 deleting all of the nearly 2,500 posts (or “tweets”) from an “X” account bearing his name (@TylerACherry) and which he controls.² Mr. Cherry’s social media activity had sparked “a political firestorm,” after “screenshots of posts dating back to 2014 and 2015 began circulating online, revealing strong criticisms of law enforcement, calls for the abolishment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and statements supporting anti-Israel organizations.”³

Mr. Cherry was forced to respond to the controversy after he had left Interior to begin a role at the White House, posting on “X”, “Past social media posts from when I was younger do not reflect my current views. Period. I support this Administration's agenda - and will continue my communications work focused on our climate and environmental policies.”⁴ Despite the fact that Mr. Cherry was no longer at Interior by this time, his disavowal of his prior activity only serves to highlight the negligence of DOI leadership while he served at the Department. Mr. Cherry has since locked-down his account, protecting his posts so that “Only approved followers can see @TylerACherry’s posts.”⁵

The “X” platform offers a process through which accounts may become “verified” and receive a gray checkmark indicating “that an account represents a government/multilateral organization or a government/multilateral official...Eligible government individuals may include: Heads of state (presidents, monarchs and prime ministers), deputy heads of state (vice presidents, deputy prime ministers), national-level cabinet members or equivalent, the main official spokesperson for the executive branch or equivalent.”⁶ Tyler Cherry’s account contains a gray checkmark. Clicking on the checkmark reveals the account was verified in November 2021, and states, “This account is verified because it is a government or multilateral organization account.”⁷ This statement indicates the account is considered an official account of the agency. Similarly, the main U.S. Department of the Interior account (@Interior) and accounts of offices within DOI, such as the Bureau of Land Management – National (@BLMNational), sport gray checkmarks as verified government accounts.

²Fox News, “New White House official deletes thousands of tweets amid backlash: 'Cover his tracks?'” <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/new-white-house-official-deletes-thousands-tweets-amid-backlash>

³ Newsweek, “Biden Official Responds After Conservative Controversy Over Past Tweets,” <https://www.newsweek.com/tyler-cherry-biden-official-apologizes-white-house-tweets-1916315>

⁴ X, Tyler Cherry, <https://x.com/TylerACherry/status/1804955210269528087>

⁵ X, Tyler Cherry, <https://x.com/TylerACherry> (last checked Oct. 13, 2024)

⁶ X, “About profile labels and checkmarks on X”, <https://help.x.com/en/rules-and-policies/profile-labels>

⁷ Tyler Cherry, X, <https://x.com/TylerACherry>



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perceive that DOI endorses the statements Mr. Cherry made in dozens of controversial posts.

Does the Department of the Interior, for instance, support the statement, “the modern day police system is a direct evolution of slave patrols and lynch mobs”? Does the Department consider this statement to apply to its own law enforcement forces, such as the Park Police and BLM Law Enforcement. Is it the policy of DOI to “Abolish ICE”?¹² Does the Department, which contains its own law enforcement agencies as noted above, endorse the belief that law enforcement in the United States represents “a capitalistic police state motivated by explicit and implicit racial biases?”¹³ Is “Cheersing in bars to ending the occupation of Palestine – no shame and f— your glares #ISupportGaza #FreePalestine”¹⁴ the official policy of the Department of the Interior? All of these statements appeared on the @TylerACherry X account while it was a verified government account of the Department of the Interior.

Further, it is inconceivable that the Department of the Interior was unaware that Mr. Cherry was operating the @TylerACherry account as a verified government account or that DOI leadership had no knowledge of content on the account that was either highly controversial or contradicted the stated policy of the Biden-Harris administration. As early as October 2023, media reports revealed posts on the account that were described as “blast[ing] law enforcement as white supremacy” and “call[ing] for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Homeland Security Department agency tasked with preventing cross-border crime and illegal immigration, to be abolished.”¹⁵ When this report was published, the posts it referenced were clearly tied to an account with a gray checkmark, indicating it was a verified government account. Does the Department of the Interior consider this acceptable?

The facts only get worse. For more than 7 months after the October 2023 article was published, and more than two-and-a-half years after the account was verified, not only did the Department of the Interior permit an X account with these posts to maintain its status as a verified government account of the Department of the Interior but DOI actually promoted the individual in charge of this account. In December 2023, DOI announced that Mr. Cherry was advancing from his role as press secretary to take over

¹² Isabel Keane, “New Biden official’s resurfaced tweets compare cops to ‘slave patrols,’ support ‘Free Palestine’”, New York Post (June 24, 2024), <https://nypost.com/2024/06/24/us-news/biden-official-addresses-resurfaced-tweets-that-were-anti-israel-compared-cops-to-slave-patrols/>

¹³ Thomas Catenacci, “White House silent after Biden official’s posts attacking police, boosting Russia ‘scandal’ resurface”, Fox News (Oct. 7, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/white-house-silent-biden-officials-posts-attacking-police-boosting-russia-scandal-resurface>

¹⁴ Isabel Keane, “New Biden official’s resurfaced tweets compare cops to ‘slave patrols,’ support ‘Free Palestine’”, New York Post (June 24, 2024), <https://nypost.com/2024/06/24/us-news/biden-official-addresses-resurfaced-tweets-that-were-anti-israel-compared-cops-to-slave-patrols/>

¹⁵ Thomas Catenacci, “White House silent after Biden official’s posts attacking police, boosting Russia ‘scandal’ resurface”, Fox News (Oct. 7, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/white-house-silent-biden-officials-posts-attacking-police-boosting-russia-scandal-resurface>



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the position of the Department's communications director. Under these circumstances, the American people could fairly conclude that the Department of the Interior endorses the views expressed by Tyler Cherry on the verified government X account he operates.

Conclusion

Based upon the facts detailed above, we urge the DOI Inspector General to investigate possible violations of federal records laws and Department of the Interior policies related to the Twitter/X account @TylerACherry, at one time a verified government account of the Department of the Interior. The department leadership's apparent failure to enforce, or negligence in enforcing, rules regarding the preservation of federal records may have not only allowed an official department social media account to leave the control of the agency, in violation of the agency's obligations as described by NARA, but also may, as a result, have allowed federal records to have been destroyed when Mr. Cherry deleted the nearly 2,500 posts on that account.

The behavior of the Department of the Interior leadership during this incident raises several questions that the investigation should address:

1. What policies has the department enacted to satisfy its obligations with respect to social media accounts? If none, why has it not enacted any such policies?
2. How are employees informed of the department's and, by extension, the employees' obligations regarding official or verified social media accounts?
3. Who is in charge of compliance with federal records laws? What steps has this official taken to enforce the department's and its employees' obligations?
4. What is the department's policy regarding obtaining verification of personal accounts as government accounts? How are employees notified of this policy?
5. What is the department's policy for ensuring federal records maintained on official and/or verified government social media accounts are preserved in compliance with federal records laws?
6. What steps does the department take to obtain control of official and/or verified government social media accounts when the employee operating the account leaves the agency? Why were these steps not followed in this case?

We look forward to your prompt attention to this matter and to answering any questions you may have. I can be reached at michael@protectpublictrust.org.

Thank you,

Michael Chamberlain
Director
Protect the Public's Trust