

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

8/18/2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior

Dear Secretary Haaland:

The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) is responsible for overseeing various trusts involving U.S. territories and affiliated Island Communities.¹ This includes overseeing the Resettlement Trust Fund for the people of Bikini Atoll, which was established in 1982 to fund the relocation of its residents.² That relocation was necessary because, following World War II, the residents of Bikini Atoll were evacuated so that the U.S. military could use the territory to test nuclear weapons. The U.S. military detonated twenty-three nuclear weapons over a twelve-year period, which resulted in the chain of islands becoming uninhabitable.³

Congress has appropriated \$110 million to The Resettlement Trust Fund relocation efforts.⁴ Recent news reporting from the *Wall Street Journal* shows that money from The Resettlement Trust Fund has been misused by Anderson Jibas, the Mayor of the Kili-Bikini-Ejit (KBE) local government, and Gordon Benjamin, a former Interior Department employee, for a “spending spree” that included both a 34-passenger plane for \$3.25 million and 283 acres of land in Hilo, Hawaii for \$4.8 million.⁵ Additionally the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, in October 2019, “Benjamin and Jibas asked Arden Trust to deposit \$50,000 from The Resettlement Fund into Jibas’s personal savings account to pay for meetings with government officials and traditional celebrations.”⁶ The *Wall Street Journal* viewed checks, which draw their money from The Resettlement Fund showing Jibas “spent more than \$300,000 on travel, hotels and other community events over a period of several months in 2018”⁷ as well as “\$14,050.53 for a vacation for Jibas; \$33,950 for a new pickup truck for him; and \$1,500 for the mayor’s medical checkup.”⁸

¹ *About Interior*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, (Accessed July 19, 2023), <https://www.doi.gov/about>.

² *Legislative Hearing on Various Bills: Before the S. Comm. on Energy and Natural Resources*, 115th Cong. (2018) (testimony of Douglas Domenech, Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas, Dept. of the Interior), <https://www.doi.gov/ocls/s-2182>.

³ Dan Frosch & Christine Mai-Duc, *Nuclear Tests Ravaged Their Home. Their Leaders Drained a Compensation Fund Dry*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, (July 15, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/nuclear-tests-ravaged-their-home-their-leaders-drained-a-compensation-fund-dry-56f9ecf?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo.

⁴ *Bikini Resettlement and Relocation Act of 1999*, H.R. 2368, 106th Cong. (1999). <https://www.congress.gov/106/crpt/hrpt267/CRPT-106hrpt267.pdf>.

⁵ Dan Frosch & Christine Mai-Duc, *Nuclear Tests Ravaged Their Home. Their Leaders Drained a Compensation Fund Dry*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, (July 15, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/nuclear-tests-ravaged-their-home-their-leaders-drained-a-compensation-fund-dry-56f9ecf?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

Congress also created the Bikini Claims Fund (The Claims Fund) which is now overseen by independent trustees.⁹ Each Bikinian received a quarterly distribution from The Claims Fund until February 2023. At that time the trust had reportedly fallen to \$100,000 from the approximately \$59 million in 2017.¹⁰

Since the creation of the The Claims Fund, the DOI has worked with the KBE local government to oversee the payments to Bikinians. DOI worked “to ensure the annual drawdowns from the trust fund were controlled to maintain the fund.”¹¹ In performing oversight, the DOI set the local government’s annual budgets and approved additional expenses.¹²

However, in 2016, Mayor Jibas reportedly successfully lobbied the U.S. government for increased autonomy over The Claims Fund.¹³ In response, the DOI transferred the decision-making power to the Mayor and Council Leaders of Bikini.¹⁴ DOI reserved two rights in this agreement which included the ability to ask the KBE government for information about whether it exceeded \$2 million for projects and “that one year prior to completion of the rehabilitation and resettlement program, the Secretary of the Interior shall report to Congress on future funding needs on Bikini Atoll.”¹⁵ When confronted about the dwindling funds, Carmen Cantor, Assistant Secretary of Insular and International Affairs, explained that DOI “took the matter seriously and had referred it to the agency’s inspector general.”¹⁶

The reported improper spending by government officials with access to these two Funds as well as the apparent depletion of The Claims Fund requires immediate explanation. The American people deserve transparency in knowing how their tax dollars have been spent. Please provide answers to the following questions by September 8, 2023:

1. Why did The Claims Fund fall from a multi-million dollar fund to \$100,000?

⁹ Pete McKenzie, *\$59 Million, Gone: How Bikini Atoll Leaders Blew Through U.S. Trust Fund*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, (May 3, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/world/asia/bikini-atoll-resettlement-fund.html>.

¹⁰ Dan Frosch & Christine Mai-Duc, *Nuclear Tests Ravaged Their Home. Their Leaders Drained a Compensation Fund Dry*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, (July 15, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/nuclear-tests-ravaged-their-home-their-leaders-drained-a-compensation-fund-dry-56f9ecf?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo.

¹¹ Giff Johnson, *Bikini resettlement trust fund money is history*, MARIANAS VARIETY, (May 15, 2023), https://www.mvariety.com/news/bikini-resettlement-trust-fund-money-is-history/article_b4a4de00-f222-11ed-a063-4797302b9569.html.

¹² Dan Frosch & Christine Mai-Duc, *Nuclear Tests Ravaged Their Home. Their Leaders Drained a Compensation Fund Dry*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, (July 15, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/nuclear-tests-ravaged-their-home-their-leaders-drained-a-compensation-fund-dry-56f9ecf?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Interior Authorizes Full Decision-Making Power to Bikini Leaders over Annual Budget of the Bikini Resettlement Trust Fund*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, (Nov. 30, 2020), <https://www.doi.gov/oia/interior-authorizes-full-decision-making-power-bikini-leaders-over-annual-budget-bikini#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%28November%2028%2C%202017%29%20%E2%80%93%20U.S.%20Department%20of,the%20people%20of%20Kili%2C%20Bikini%20and%20Ejit%20Atolls>.

¹⁵ PL 100–446 (HR 4867), Sep. 27, 1988, 102 Stat 1774.

¹⁶ Dan Frosch & Christine Mai-Duc, *Nuclear Tests Ravaged Their Home. Their Leaders Drained a Compensation Fund Dry*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, (July 15, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/nuclear-tests-ravaged-their-home-their-leaders-drained-a-compensation-fund-dry-56f9ecf?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo.

2. Was the DOI informed of the purchase of the \$3.25 million plane or the purchase of \$4.8 million worth of land in Hilo, Hawaii? Was DOI aware of the spending reported by the *Wall Street Journal*? If not, why not? Please provide all records.¹⁷
3. Does DOI possess a list of all taxpayer-funded spending from The Claims Fund and The Resettlement Fund? If so, please provide it. If not, why not?
4. Has the DOI utilized either of its two reserved rights following the decision to decrease DOI oversight? ¹⁸ If so, when and for what purpose? Provide all records and reports.
5. What steps has the DOI taken to prevent unethical and illegal behavior regarding The Claims Fund and The Resettlement Fund? What steps has DOI taken to perform oversight of spending from these two funds? Please explain.
6. What steps, if any, has DOI taken to recoup misspent taxpayer money? If none, please explain why not.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Should you have any questions, please contact Julian Wilson on my Committee staff at (202) 224-0642.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Budget

¹⁷ "Records" include any written, recorded, or graphic material of any kind, including letters, memoranda, reports, notes, electronic data (emails, email attachments, and any other electronically created or stored information), calendar entries, inter-office communications, meeting minutes, phone/voice mail or recordings/records of verbal communications, and drafts (whether or not they resulted in final documents).

¹⁸ *Legislative Hearing on Various Bills: Before the S. Comm. on Energy and Natural Resources.*, 115th Cong. (2018) (testimony of Douglas Domenech, Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas, Dept. of the Interior), <https://www.doi.gov/ocl/s-2182>; See also *Interior Authorizes Full Decision-Making Power to Bikini Leaders over Annual Budget of the Bikini Resettlement Trust Fund*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, (Nov. 30, 2020), <https://www.doi.gov/oia/interior-authorizes-full-decision-making-power-bikini-leaders-over-annual-budget-bikini#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%28November%2028%2C%202017%29%20%E2%80%93%20U.S.%20Department%20of,the%20people%20of%20Kili%2C%20Bikini%20and%20Ejit%20Atolls>.