

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 16, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro  
Chair  
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jon Tester  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Defense  
122 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Betty McCollum  
Chair  
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Defense  
H-405 The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Martin Heinrich  
Chair  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Military Construction,  
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies  
125 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Chairwoman  
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Military Construction,  
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies  
HT-2 The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Chairs Leahy, DeLauro, Tester, McCollum, Heinrich and Wasserman Schultz:

We write to inform you of an ongoing emergency on the island of Oahu and request your immediate assistance to secure the federal funding necessary to prevent permanent damage to Oahu's federally designated sole-source groundwater aquifer. Since November 20, 2021, fuel from the World War II-era Red Hill bulk fuel storage facility (RHBFSF) has contaminated the Navy's water system that services the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Ford Island, Ewa Beach, and Aliamanu areas. This fuel leak has affected almost 100,000 residents, forcibly displaced more than 3,500 military families into temporary lodging, and sickened many with rashes, sore throats, stomach pain, headaches, diarrhea and vomiting, and oral chemical burns.

In the last twenty months, RHBFSF has experienced fuel leaks at an increasingly alarming rate. While the Navy has not identified the source of the most recent fuel contamination, two previous leaks provide some explanation. On May 6, 2021, approximately 1,618 gallons of jet fuel leaked from a distribution pipeline inside RHBFSF because of an operator error during the transfer of fuel. At the time, the Navy said that its catchment system collected all but 38 gallons of the fuel. However, the commander of Pacific Fleet has now called these facts into question and reopened the investigation to determine the total fuel that leaked and why the Navy could not

accurately account for missing fuel. On November 20, 2021, the Navy reported another leak of approximately 14,000 gallons of a mix of water and fuel in RHBFSF's lower tunnel. That water-fuel mix released after an operator collided with a fire suppression line and ruptured it. The Navy has not explained how fuel got into the fire suppression line, including if it is fuel associated with the May 2021 release or some other leak. Regardless, the Hawaii Department of Health tested the water in the Navy's Red Hill shaft and well adjacent to the fuel facility, detected gasoline- and diesel-range hydrocarbons at levels up to 350 times what the state considers safe, and recommended that users stop using the water.

Importantly, these recent fuel leaks follow a years-long effort by state and federal regulators to improve the safety of RHBFSF following a January 2014 leak when about 27,000 gallons of jet fuel leaked from a fuel tank. The Navy concluded that the cause of that specific leak was poor contractor performance during a routine tank repair. However, it also learned that the Navy ignored the alarm from its own leak monitoring system when it sounded. The 2014 accident and the leaks that followed are indicative of a Navy organizational culture at RHBFSF where safety and accountability are given inadequate attention—a culture that persists today.

We recognize that this is an ongoing public health emergency, and the Navy will need to continue to work with state and local regulators to address this crisis. It must also communicate its long-term needs to Congress so that we can provide the federal funding to protect the people of Hawaii and our service members and their families from continued threats to the drinking water. Nevertheless, we request your immediate assistance to make available all appropriate federal resources in the short-term to address this emergency. Specifically, we ask the following:

**Demand the Department of Defense spare no expense to address the immediate crisis:**

We must bring the full power of Congress to bear on the Department of Defense (DoD) to ensure that it is spending every dollar it has available to address this emergency right now. We are deeply concerned that despite this being a crisis of its own making, the Navy may be reluctant to spend the money required to meet the moment because of concerns about unknown future emergency needs or simply not wanting to own the long-term costs associated with this crisis.

We respectfully request your commitment to work with us to ensure that DoD senior leaders understand the gravity of the situation and commit whatever resources are required to identify, isolate, and remediate the source of the contamination; make impacted military and civilian families whole; and put in place water treatment and filtration to ensure the drinking water is safe for the public. Congress should assure the department that it will backfill its expenses in the next available funding bill so that it can continue to commit the serious resources needed to protect the people of Oahu from any continued public health threat, but DoD must act right away.

**Fund future requirements as part of the next must-pass spending bill:** We ask for your commitment that Congress will provide robust funding to support ongoing federal activities to improve safety and operations at RHBFSF. The next must-pass spending bill should provide the

Navy, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Health and Human Services, and other federal agencies the resources they need to monitor, detect, and ultimately prevent future fuel leaks. While we will continue to work with federal, state, and local stakeholders to identify their precise needs, we see immediate funding requirements in three key areas:

- **Environmental protection:** Congress must provide funding to maintain a local lab that can regularly test water samples at the concentration level that is necessary to ensure the drinking water remains safe. This lab should also have the capability to rapidly test contaminated soil to accurately assess any level of contamination. While the Navy has started the process to establish this lab at the University of Hawaii, we need to ensure it is well resourced for the long term. We also need to provide funding to strengthen EPA's oversight of the Navy's management of RHBFSF. Because it is clear that the Navy has failed to manage RHBFSF to a standard that protects the health and safety of the people of Hawaii, the EPA should take on a more involved oversight role of the facility. It has the expertise and the public's trust in terms of safely managing underground fuel storage tanks, but it needs funding for this expanded oversight mission.
- **Infrastructure improvements:** Congress must provide funding to rapidly improve the safety of RHBFSF's pipeline system and other critical facility infrastructure. While the Navy has provided sustainment dollars to repair and modernize the fuel tanks and fire suppression system, the department has woefully underinvested in the pipelines that move fuel between the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam piers and the fuel farm. Portions of this decades-old pipeline system date back to the Second World War and are not managed in accordance with federal pipeline standards. We need a massive investment of sustainment funds to harden the facility's infrastructure against accidents that could happen in the short run even as we deal with the future of RHBFSF. We also need to install leak detection systems in the underground tunnel network; make other emergency repair actions to critical facility infrastructure; and bring the pipeline network into compliance with the standards set by other federal agencies to help guard against future fuel leaks.
- **Study future risks:** Congress must fund an urgent, comprehensive investigation of the RHBFSF fuel system to map out the underground network used to transfer fuel from the refueling pier to the fuel tanks so we can identify other future vulnerable points within the system, even as we make improvements in the short term. The Navy currently uses 1940s schematics of the pipeline system to inform its understanding of the network, and it does not know the extent of the infrastructure or its vulnerabilities.

We also need an independent hydrology study and ground water flow mapping study that will give state and local regulators, and the Navy, better information about the immediate and long-term risks surrounding RHBFSF. The underground fuel tanks are 100 feet

above the island of Oahu's federally designated sole source aquifer, the southern Oahu basal aquifer, which provides 20 percent of Oahu's drinking water. The Honolulu Board of Water Supply has warned that a catastrophic fuel leak could cause a long-term contamination of the aquifer and threaten public health. Part of that concern stems from the uncertainty around how any fuel leak, including a catastrophic one, would move within the volcanic rock underneath RHBFSF, including if it would migrate in unpredictable ways toward groundwater aquifers or other drinking water wells.

These short-term investments are critical to address the ongoing contamination of the Navy's drinking water system and to shore up RHBFSF to prevent future fuel leaks. We know that there are long-term questions that we must resolve around the future of RHBFSF. Whatever the final analysis on RHBFSF's future, the immediate funding that Congress provides in the next available must-pass spending bill will ensure that we can deal with the future of the facility and its pipeline infrastructure in a responsible and safe manner, without any additional risks to public health or the environment.

Thank you for your support of our request and your effort to ensure that the people of Hawaii have access to safe drinking water, now and into the future.

Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ  
U.S. Senator



MAZIE K. HIRONO  
U.S. Senator



ED CASE  
U.S. Representative



KAIALI'I KAHELE  
U.S. Representative