

Dear Chairman Dayton and Members of the Board,

Thank you for replying to our invitation to connect, though we were disappointed by your response. As you succinctly described, the Board's sphere of influence is governance, the basic principles of which are accountability, transparency, fairness, and responsibility. We therefore believe it is not only manifestly in the best interests of Defenders and its constituencies for its Board to intervene where management is failing, but it is your ethical and fiduciary duty to do so.

That is also why we want to call your attention to the recent article published in E&E News and Politico titled "[Environmental group staffers say it's a 'nightmare to go to work.'](#)" It establishes a lengthy timeline of mismanagement of Defenders of Wildlife under our CEO and adds to a growing number of testimonies on the public record. These are not the mutterings of just a few disgruntled former staff. Passionate people do not leave jobs they dreamed of landing their whole lives because of the Great Resignation or because they are "young and don't know the real Defenders." People of all ages and tenures are leaving in droves because senior leadership is making Defenders too toxic to stay.

These issues are not going away. Both staff and middle management have repeatedly attested that Defenders' relationships, institutional memory, and innovativeness – and therefore our productivity, processes, and efficiency – are already materially damaged by the ongoing and pervasive culture of fear amongst staff, and the "mechanized revolving door" that is our turnover rate. Three independent assessments have been conducted attesting to this fact – one commissioned by the Board itself.

We understand your inclination not to intrude on senior leadership's sphere of responsibility; however, we contend that if senior leadership's management of these issues were sufficient unto itself to solve them, we would have seen more progress by now. Instead, at least 128 staff have departed the organization since 2019 – 34 just since January. Defenders currently has 39 vacancies to fill. We are operating at roughly 20% reduced capacity; yet in the past few months, at least three willing staff members have been forced to leave the organization because senior leadership would not be flexible on remote work accommodations.

We need your help. We are doing our best to enact positive change at the bargaining table, but continual obstacles are placed in our way during negotiations, including (but not limited to): senior leadership's refusal to provide basic information to the Union that we need in order to negotiate effectively; verbal abuse of our representatives by senior leadership's external lawyer, whose conduct is overly aggressive and counterproductive; and senior leadership disallowing our field staff to do their jobs earlier this year unless they signed an agreement that placed our HQ staff at risk of contracting COVID-19. All of this, and more, has made it difficult to achieve progress that would go a long way toward making staff feel heard, respected, and valued.

This situation is not sustainable. Aggressively maintaining the status quo while staff continue to turn over is not a solution. The fact that our Union maintains strong support among staff when 32 of its original members have departed the organization is a testament to this fact.

We therefore reiterate our invitation to all Board members to sit down and talk with us – whether officially or unofficially, singly or together, on or off the record. And we do encourage you to observe a bargaining session at some stage. Observers do not participate in negotiations, they merely observe, so you would not be overstepping your governance role.

As our organization's ultimate custodians, you bear responsibility for its success or failure. We want to know how much longer you will wait, and how many more skilled conservation professionals will leave Defenders disenfranchised and disillusioned before you deem it prudent to listen to our perspective and hold senior leadership accountable for its failures.

Yours sincerely,

Heidi, John, Kat, Kathleen, Ron, Siobhan & Tracy  
Representing the 81 members of Defenders United