



STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA

# OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

KRISTI NOEM | GOVERNOR

April 13, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Mr. President,

Last month, the National Park Service (NPS) notified us that they would be reneging on our Memorandum of Agreement to return fireworks to Mount Rushmore National Memorial in a safe and responsible manner.

I am raising this issue with you because the letter we received from NPS contradicts statements you made in March that held up Independence Day as a target date for Americans to begin returning to normal:

*[B]y July the 4th, there's a good chance you, your families, and friends will be able to get together in your backyard or in your neighborhood and have a cookout and a barbeque and celebrate Independence Day. ...After this long hard year, that will make this Independence Day something truly special, where we not only mark our independence as a nation, but we begin to mark our independence from this virus.*

There is a long history of celebrations of American independence at Mount Rushmore National Memorial, including fireworks displays from 1998 to 2009 and again in 2020. This year, as we mark our independence from this virus, Mount Rushmore would be the perfect place for a national celebration and fireworks show.

The NPS sent a letter listing several reasons why they believe a fireworks celebration would not be safe or responsible this year, but the facts and data tell a very different story.

NPS first outlined health and safety concerns for employees and visitors if fireworks returned this year, focusing specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic and current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. Last year, we hosted



more than seven thousand people. Contact tracing weeks after the event could not trace a single case of COVID-19 to the event – in South Dakota or in any other state.

Moreover, COVID-19 vaccination efforts are moving much more quickly than anticipated. As of April 9, roughly 20% of the country is fully vaccinated – and over 50% of South Dakotans have received at least their first shot. We believe this was part of the inspiration for your optimistic statements. Given the progress we are making as a nation, wouldn't cancelling an event months in advance due to COVID concerns fail to recognize both the science and the evidence?

NPS also cites potential tribal concerns. In South Dakota, we value the partnerships we have with each of our state's nine tribes. Accordingly, the tribes were consulted before last year's event and invited to attend our planning meetings. South Dakota's Department of Tribal Relations was involved in every step of the process. And attendees of last year's event enjoyed Native American-led programming before the fireworks itself, including a performance by Dakota Hoop Dancer Jasmin Pickner-Bell and a reading by Lakota Storyteller Darrell Red Cloud. We would also consult with tribal leaders for this year's event and again invite them to join us to celebrate America's birthday in 2021.

NPS also cited environmental risks to the park itself, including perchlorate levels in the water at the Memorial and wildfire risks to the Black Hills. But prior to conducting the 2020 celebration, NPS published a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) stating that the event would not harm the natural environment of the Black Hills. In addition, when environmental conditions have not been favorable to the fireworks celebration—as in 2002, for example—we have refrained from holding the event. The same approach would occur this year.

Finally, with regard to the statement that the 2020 event's attendance limitations "impacted tens of thousands who were not able to visit the Memorial or had their visit cut short," NPS is painting a very misleading picture. Long before the pandemic hit, the State of South Dakota agreed to limit attendance for the fireworks due to previous years' poor crowd control and the resulting overcrowding. It is also why we celebrate on July 3, so that everyone can enjoy the Memorial on July 4.

In planning last year's event, we did our due diligence to ensure this event could be held safely and responsibly:

- We worked with the U.S. Department of the Interior on all required environmental reviews.
- We followed every item on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance checklist.



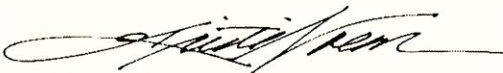
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- We held multiple community meetings and public hearings leading up to the event.
- We created a "Go/No-Go Checklist" with conditions that must be met on the day of the event, including fire preparedness levels, wind speeds, and burning index. This list was reviewed regularly and signed by the Interior Department on the day of the event.
- We implemented an incident management team that met every guideline outlined by Ready.gov.
- We had an emergency operations center on site for two weeks—one week leading up to the event and one week after.
- We created and adhered to an emergency response checklist and manual.
- We assigned specific solicitors to handle First Amendment permits and accommodations.
- We coordinated with NPS on all communication activities relating to the event.

We are committed to hosting a Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration that is safe and responsible and working closely with NPS to do so. I respectfully ask that you continue the hopeful message you shared earlier this year and uphold our Agreement to host the event this year.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristi Noem", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kristi Noem  
Governor