

From: POLITICO Pro Energy
To: megan_bloomgren@ios.doi.gov
Subject: Afternoon Energy, presented by the National Wildlife Federation: "Challenges" of the EPA hiring freeze — New front in DAPL fight — Pipeline explodes in South Texas
Date: Wednesday, February 15, 2017 2:50:29 PM

By Kelsey Tamborrino | 02/15/2017 03:47 PM EDT

With help from Ben Lefebvre

'CHALLENGES' OF THE EPA HIRING FREEZE: President Donald Trump's government-wide hiring freeze is starting to hurt EPA's ability to function, acting Administrator Catherine McCabe said today. "The freeze on hiring is already creating some challenges to our ability to get the agency's work done," McCabe said in a [video](#) posted to the agency's YouTube channel. Trump announced the 90-day freeze quickly after taking office and recently issued a [memorandum](#) further outlining it. McCabe added that the White House's regulatory freeze "has raised many questions." EPA is working through those issues with the transition team and the White House, she said. More [here](#) from Alex Guillén.

But she's not the only one: Agriculture Department Inspector General Phyllis Wong [told](#) the House Appropriations Committee agriculture panel this morning the department's Office of Inspector General has 40 jobs open, but a lack of money and the government-wide hiring freeze ordered by Trump is preventing most of them from being filled.

Welcome to Afternoon Energy and welcome to Wednesday! I'm your host Kelsey Tamborrino. Send your thoughts, news and tips to ktamborrino@politico.com, mdaily@politico.com and njuliano@politico.com, and keep up with us on Twitter at [@kelseytam](#), [@dailym1](#), [@nickjuliano](#), [@Morning_Energy](#) and [@POLITICOPro](#).

**** A message from the National Wildlife Federation:** America's 40 million hunters and anglers depend upon our nation's public lands. Some in Congress want to overturn National Monument protections or even sell-off the places Americans hunt, fish, hike, and camp. Join us as we urge President Trump and Congress to defend America's public lands for future generations: <http://bit.ly/2lhONxJ> **

MORE SIOUX SEEK TO BLOCK DAPL: The Oglala Sioux Tribe has joined the effort to block construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. A [lawsuit](#) the tribe filed earlier this month argues that Trump's memo designed to expedite the pipeline's approval "inappropriately interfered" with the Army Corps of Engineers' December plan to complete an environmental impact statement for the project. Although not specifically mentioned in the complaint, the Oglala Sioux also allege that the Trump administration's interest in the project may not rest solely on its merits. Tribe president Troy "Scott" Weston said he remained skeptical that Trump had disposed of his stake in Energy Transfer Partners LLP, the Dallas-based pipeline company that is developing DAPL. A White House spokesperson said in November that Trump had sold off his shares. "He said he did sell his share," Weston said today in a press conference announcing the suit. "We want to see a canceled check. We want to see a receipt. We want to see anything that's out there that says he did what he said he did."

PIPELINE EXPLODES IN TEXAS: Early today a pipeline erupted in South Texas, The Associated Press [reports](#), causing an explosion that shook homes and sent a fireball that lit up the sky. Texas Department of Public Safety Sgt. Nathan Brandley said the explosion occurred

shortly after midnight near Refugio, a rural community about 15 miles from the Texas coast and north of Corpus Christi. No one was hurt. The pipeline is owned by Houston-based pipeline operator Kinder Morgan, which said in a statement that the fire was extinguished and that the company is trying to determine the impact to customers.

PORTMAN, SHAHEEN REINTRODUCE EFFICIENCY BILL: Sens. [Rob Portman](#) of Ohio and [Jeanne Shaheen](#) of New Hampshire today introduced the latest version of their bipartisan "Energy Savings and Industrial Competitiveness Act," part of which contains key energy efficiency policy reforms that aim to strengthen the economy and reduce pollution. The bill has been around in one form or another since at least 2011, and it served as the foundation for last year's larger Senate energy bill, which passed 85-12 but ultimately failed to become law after negotiations with the House collapsed in December.

SENATORS SPEAK OUT ON PRUITT: [Tom Carper](#), [Brian Schatz](#), [Sheldon Whitehouse](#), [Chris Coons](#) and [Bob Casey](#) will speak at tonight on Capitol Hill in opposition of Scott Pruitt's nomination to head EPA. The senators will gather as part of a rally hosted by green groups Clean Air Moms Action, EDF Action, Defend Our Future Action, the League of Conservation Voters, Sierra Club, Earthjustice, 350.org and Clean Water Action, according to a press release. "Pruitt's nomination puts the health of our families and the safety of our communities at risk," the release said. "The agency charged with enforcing our environmental laws should be led by someone who is committed to its mission and free from conflicts." **If you go:** The rally is at 5 p.m. at Upper Senate Park.

CVR ENERGY SETTLES DISPUTE: The SEC on Tuesday said it settled a case that alleged "that the Sugar Land refiner company CVR Energy made inadequate disclosures in regulatory filings about fee arrangements with two investment banks that the company hired to ward off a hostile takeover bid," FuelFix [reports](#). The company agreed to settle the case without admitting or denying the SEC's findings. No penalty was assessed, which the agency said reflects CVR Energy's cooperation with the investigation.

IoT IN THE BIG CITY: Nearly 180 million internet-connected devices are exposed to potential attackers in the 10 largest U.S. cities, according to a new study out today from Trend Micro. The research, which relies on one month of data, is based on Shodan, a search engine for such devices. Trend Micro further broke down the information by city and sector. One industry that gets a lot of attention, the energy sector, has most of its assets located in smaller cities and towns, Trend Micro found. (h/t [Morning Cyber](#))

MAIL CALL — PRUITT LOSES CRAFT BREWERY VOTE: A group of brewers sent a letter a "Dear senator" letter today, urging a no vote on Pruitt. "Pruitt's record of attacking clean water protections shows that he is the wrong choice to lead the agency," they write. Beer, they note, is about 90 percent water, "making local water supply quality and its characteristics, such as pH and mineral content, critical to beer brewing and the flavor of many classic brews." [The letter](#) was signed by companies including Allagash Brewing Company, Brooklyn Brewery and Center of the Universe Brewing Company.

NRDC SUES OVER BEE LISTING DELAY: The Natural Resources Defense Council is challenging the decision by the Trump administration to delay the Endangered Species Act listing of the rusty-patched bumble bee, arguing that the move should have been subject to a notice and comment period. On Feb. 9, the day before the listing was set to take effect, administration officials announced the rule would be delayed until March 21. In a lawsuit filed Tuesday in a federal court in New York, the group says that decision, which was done without

any public input, violates both the ESA and the Administrative Procedures Act, NRDC alleges. Read the complaint [here](#).

All in the timing: The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee held an oversight hearing today to consider modernizing the ESA. Republicans, bolstered by calls from home builders, farmers, energy companies and other industries, have long looked for ways to rein in the far-reaching law. Details [here](#). (h/t [Morning Agriculture](#))

POPE BACKS DAPL FIGHT? Pope Francis appeared today to back Native Americans seeking to stop part of the Dakota Access pipeline, Reuters [reports](#). The pope said today indigenous cultures have a right to defend "their ancestral relationship to the earth." The Latin American pope made his comments on protection of native lands to representative of tribes attending the Indigenous Peoples Forum in Rome. "While he did not name the pipeline, he used strong and clear language applicable to the conflict, saying development had to be reconciled with 'the protection of the particular characteristics of indigenous peoples and their territories,'" Reuters writes.

New! Day Ahead: POLITICO Pro's comprehensive rundown of the day's congressional schedule, including details on legislation, votes, as well as committee hearings and markups. Day Ahead arrives in your inbox each morning to prepare you for another busy day in Washington. [Sign up to receive Day Ahead](#).

CBO: MONEY FOR NUKES UNDER DOE: Pro Defense's Connor O'Brien [writes](#): "A [new report](#) from the Congressional Budget Office estimates the cost of U.S. nuclear forces will total \$400 billion over the next 10 years, up 15 percent from the last estimate." The report, spanning 2017 to 2026, is an update required by the National Defense Authorization Act on the estimated 10-year costs for operation. "The \$400 billion estimate includes, among other things, \$189 billion for strategic nuclear systems and \$87 billion for nuclear weapons laboratories under the Energy Department and \$58 billion for Defense Department command-and-control systems." (h/t [Morning Defense](#))

QUICK HITS:

- A physicist and possible adviser to Trump describes his love of science, and CO2, [ProPublica](#).
- Climate change has already harmed almost half of all mammals, [Scientific American](#).
- U.S. solar market grows 95 percent in 2016, smashes records, [GreenTechMedia](#).
- Congress's latest target for reversal: An Obama attempt to modernize how we manage public lands, [The Washington Post](#).

WIDE WORLD OF POLITICS:

- [Trump blames](#) "fake media" for treating Flynn "very unfairly"
- Puzder's ex-wife told Oprah he threatened "[you will pay for this](#)"
- House intel chairman angrily dismisses call for [expanded Russia probe](#)

**** A message from the National Wildlife Federation:** America's 40 million hunters and

anglers depend upon our nation's public lands. Many of these lands have been protected over the past century by both Republican and Democratic Presidents through the Antiquities Act - a bedrock conservation law enacted by President Theodore Roosevelt - so that every American can enjoy our nation's outdoor treasures. These majestic places help define us as Americans. They are indispensable to America's hunting and fishing heritage - and serve as powerful economic engines for local communities. Yet right now, some in Congress want to overturn National Monument protections for iconic places, like Bears Ears in Utah. Others want to allow more pollution or even sell-off special places where Americans hunt, fish, hike, and camp. President Trump has strongly supported keeping America's public lands public and we need Congress to do the same for America's hunters and anglers. Help us defend America's public lands: <http://bit.ly/2lhONxJ> **

To view online:

<https://www.politicopro.com/tipsheets/afternoon-energy/2017/02/challenges-of-the-epa-hiring-freeze-021413>

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EPA's McCabe: Hiring freeze 'creating some challenges' for agency [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 02/15/2017 01:37 PM EDT

President Donald Trump's government-wide hiring freeze is starting to hurt EPA's ability to function, acting Administrator Catherine McCabe said today.

"The freeze on hiring is already creating some challenges to our ability to get the agency's work done," McCabe said in a [video](#) posted to the agency's YouTube channel.

McCabe did not elaborate on the sort of challenges that are arising because of the hiring freeze, which is slated to end in April. She added that the White House's regulatory freeze "has raised many questions." EPA is working through those issues with the transition team and the White House, she said.

And McCabe noted that Scott Pruitt is expected to be confirmed as EPA administrator as early as Friday, and that he may arrive at the agency as early as that day.

Other political appointees will start arriving on Friday "or in the coming weeks," added McCabe, who will return to her post as deputy Region 2 administrator once Pruitt is sworn in.

[Back](#)

Trump hiring freeze hitting USDA IG, and DeLauro doesn't like it [Back](#)

By Jenny Hopkinson | 02/15/2017 12:33 PM EDT

The Agriculture Department's Office of Inspector General has 40 jobs open, but a lack of money and the government-wide hiring freeze ordered by President Donald Trump is preventing most of them from being filled.

That's what Inspector General Phyllis Wong told the House Appropriations Committee agriculture panel this morning, in response to a question from Rep. [Rosa DeLauro](#). The Connecticut Democrat warned that the lack of staff is hurting the oversight of agency

programs.

"You don't have the resources today to dig into the corners that we need to dig in to in order to protect public safety in terms of food, to look at broadband, in order to look at international organics coming in ... in order to deal with the housing issues that we have talked about here, IT security, the whole nine yards," DeLauro said.

What's more, since 59 percent of the OIG's resources are put toward investigations of the SNAP program, "there are a lot of issues here that are truly going begging," she said.

"At some point just say, flat out, 'We don't have the resources and the staff to be able to go in the direction that the members of Congress would like us to go,'" DeLauro said.

[Back](#)

CBO estimates \$400 billion for nukes over the next decade [Back](#)

By Connor O'Brien | 02/14/2017 04:59 PM EDT

A [new report](#) from the Congressional Budget Office estimates the cost of U.S. nuclear forces will total \$400 billion over the next 10 years, up 15 percent from the last estimate.

The report, spanning 2017 to 2026, is an update required by the National Defense Authorization Act on the estimated 10-year costs for operation, maintenance and modernization of U.S. nuclear forces.

The \$400 billion estimate includes, among other things, \$189 billion for strategic nuclear systems — land-based ballistic missiles, long-range bombers and ballistic missile submarines — \$87 billion for nuclear weapons laboratories under the Energy Department and \$58 billion for Defense Department command-and-control systems.

The new report places the total cost 15 percent higher than the last CBO estimate, which tallied the cost of nuclear forces from 2015 to 2024 at \$348 billion. CBO attributes much of the increase to the inclusion of "two later years of development in nuclear modernization programs."

[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

Trump blames 'fake media' for treating Flynn 'very unfairly' [Back](#)

By Louis Nelson | 02/15/2017 09:18 AM EDT

President Donald Trump said Wednesday that Michael Flynn, the national security adviser who was ousted earlier this week, is "a wonderful man" who "has been treated very, very unfairly by the media."

The remarks, which came at a bilateral news conference alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, echoed statements Trump made on Twitter on Wednesday morning, where he dismissed reports that his campaign was in frequent touch with senior Russian officials as "nonsense."

"Michael Flynn, Gen. Flynn, is a wonderful man. I think he has been treated very, very unfairly by the media, as I call it, the fake media in many cases. And I think it's really a sad thing that he was treated so badly," Trump said. It was a decidedly different message from Trump than the one White House press secretary Sean Spicer delivered a day earlier in the daily press briefing, where he said Flynn had lost the president's trust.

Trump has struggled to contain metastasizing crises, including sloppy executive orders, vicious infighting among his aides, combative calls with foreign allies, apparent ethics violations and a pile-up of evidence that Trump's team has extensive ties with Russia that may have aided his victory.

The president, however, is on the offensive, blaming the media and the intelligence community for what he continues to call "fake news."

"From intelligence, papers are being leaked, things are being leaked. It's criminal action, criminal act, and it's been going on for a long time before me, but now it's really going on," Trump said at the news conference. "People are trying to cover up for a terrible loss that the Democrats had under Hillary Clinton. I think it's very, very unfair what's happened to Gen. Flynn, the way he was treated, and the documents and papers that were illegally — I stress that — illegally leaked. Very, very unfair."

In an earlier flurry of tweets that was wide-ranging even by his own prolific standards, Trump attacked the news media first, lashing out at cable news outlets and newspapers for reporting on his alleged ties to Russia before blaming leaks on the intelligence community, of which he is in charge.

"The fake news media is going crazy with their conspiracy theories and blind hatred. [@MSNBC](#) & [@CNN](#) are unwatchable. [@foxandfriends](#) is great!" Trump tweeted Wednesday morning.

"This Russian connection non-sense is merely an attempt to cover-up the many mistakes made in Hillary Clinton's losing campaign," he continued, adding, "Information is being illegally given to the failing [@nytimes](#) & [@washingtonpost](#) by the intelligence community (NSA and FBI?). Just like Russia."

He took one more shot at the intelligence community, with which he's long had a rocky relationship, refusing to believe its assessment that Russian President Vladimir Putin directed cyberattacks trying to tilt the election his way, and accusing intelligence officials of leaking.

"The real scandal here is that classified information is illegally given out by 'intelligence' like candy. Very un-American!" Trump wrote.

Wednesday's outburst is only the latest in a string of insults Trump has hurled at the intelligence community, with which the president has clashed badly both before and since taking office. Last month, Trump lashed out at the intelligence community over a dossier containing scandalous but unverified information that he believed to have been leaked by someone in one of the nation's various intelligence agencies.

The dossier's publication by BuzzFeed prompted Trump to ask his followers on Twitter "are we living in Nazi Germany?" The comparison rankled many in the intelligence community just days before Trump was set to be inaugurated.

The latest scandal engulfing the White House is the ouster of Flynn, who was asked to resign after it became public that he had misled Vice President Mike Pence and others about his pre-inauguration phone call with the Russian ambassador, in which the two discussed U.S. sanctions against Russia. The furor intensified after reports, including from The New York Times, that members of Trump's campaign and other allies had multiple contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials during the election season.

The revelations of potentially inappropriate contact with Russian officials is not only creating negative headlines but also pushing some Republicans to call for investigations into Trump's White House.

Several Republican senators are pressing for a deeper look into Flynn's actions, suggesting Congress could call him to testify as well as examine the transcripts of his calls with the Russian ambassador to the U.S.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Wednesday morning continued to resist the idea of creating a special committee to investigate allegations of Russia election meddling, but continued to say the Senate intelligence committee would examine the issue, which could also explore other Russia issues connected to Trump's White House.

"We know they were messing around with it. We don't think they have any impact on the outcome but, obviously, we are not going to ignore something like that," McConnell said in an interview for MSNBC's "Morning Joe" that was taped Tuesday and aired Wednesday.

Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, was even more emphatic than McConnell, telling POLITICO on Wednesday that "there is absolutely not going to be" a select committee to investigate any communication between Trump's presidential campaign and the Russian government. He said Democrats are welcome to "play their politics all they want" but the intelligence panel's activities will continue as they have

under GOP leadership.

"As far as I'm concerned, we will continue to investigate the Russian activity like we've done for many years," Nunes said. "I am not going to be lectured by people who are speaking out of both sides of their mouths."

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, one of Trump's most vocal GOP critics on issues of foreign policy, was more open to the idea of a special committee during an interview on ABC's "Good Morning America." Graham said he and Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) have begun a preliminary investigation into any communication between officials from Trump's campaign and the Kremlin. Should they discover any such communication, Graham said it would be appropriate to create a joint select committee to investigate further.

"Any Trump person who was working with the Russians in an unacceptable way also needs to pay a price," Graham said. "There are real members of Congress up here, Republicans and Democrats, who love our country and are going to make sure that checks and balances that have been in place for 200 years work, even when the president is in your own party."

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, who said this week that Flynn might be asked to testify before lawmakers, on Wednesday said the controversies plaguing the White House need to be dealt with quickly, especially because they're distracting from Republicans' legislative agenda.

"There's an issue of, is the White House going to have the ability to stabilize itself," the Tennessee Republican said in an interview on "Morning Joe." "The American people are counting on us to do big things this year."

But Trump is not just battling crises related to his team's Russia contacts. He also is facing increased concern about the off-the-cuff style of his top adviser Kellyanne Conway, who has been a chief presidential surrogate.

Cable networks have become more reluctant to book her, citing credibility issues, and on Tuesday, news emerged that the Office of Government Ethics has recommended that she be disciplined for aggressively promoting Ivanka Trump's fashion line on Fox News after the president lashed out at luxury retailer Nordstrom for dropping her brand.

In another blow to the administration, House Oversight Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz is pressing the White House for details on why Trump conducted some of his response to a North Korean missile test in a public dining room at Mar-a-Lago last weekend.

There are also incessant reports of infighting among Trump's aides. Chief of staff Reince Priebus and Spicer have appeared particularly embattled, with some willing to openly question whether they have a long future in the West Wing. The position of Pence, too, has come under scrutiny, since it became clear that Trump and other top aides were aware that Flynn had misled him but did not brief the vice president until it was reported in The Washington Post.

With the appearance of a White House under siege, Trump is going on the attack after the leaks that have streamed out about his administration and insisted that he will be tougher than President Barack Obama on Russia.

"Crimea was TAKEN by Russia during the Obama Administration. Was Obama too soft on

Russia?" Trump tweeted Wednesday morning.

Karey Van Hall contributed to this report.

[Back](#)

Exclusive: Puzder's ex-wife told Oprah he threatened 'you will pay for this' [Back](#)

By Marianne LeVine and Timothy Noah | 02/15/2017 12:49 AM EDT

The ex-wife of President Donald Trump's labor secretary nominee told "The Oprah Winfrey Show" that he "vowed revenge" when she made public spousal abuse allegations, according to a 1990 tape reviewed by POLITICO on Tuesday night.

Andrew Puzder's hearing for labor secretary is Thursday, but the allegations of domestic abuse, which he's repeatedly denied, and his admission that he employed an illegal immigrant have put his confirmation in jeopardy. The details of the Oprah tape, which haven't been made public until now, could further erode his support in the Senate, where four Republicans have expressed reservations about his nomination. No Democrats are expected to support him.

During the episode, titled "High Class Battered Women," Lisa Fierstein, Puzder's ex-wife, said he told her, "I will see you in the gutter. This will never be over. You will pay for this." Fierstein also said she called the police on him.

Fierstein divorced Puzder in 1987. Eight months after appearing on "Oprah," she retracted her allegations of domestic abuse as part of a [child custody agreement](#). She [said](#) repeatedly thereafter that the allegations were a tactic to gain leverage in her divorce.

But Fierstein appeared on "Oprah" in disguise, wearing large sunglasses and a wig and using an assumed name, "Ann." She sat on a panel with two other women who also alleged abuse by their husbands. Fierstein spoke for about 5 minutes, 50 seconds of the hourlong episode.

POLITICO [first reported](#) Fierstein's appearance last month but didn't obtain a taped copy until Tuesday, from another woman who appeared in the episode.

Senators on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which will hold Puzder's confirmation hearing, have been reviewing the tape in private. Winfrey's company, the Oprah Winfrey Network, turned the tape over at the committee's request but has refused to provide a copy to the news media.

George Thompson, a spokesman for Puzder and Fierstein, said in a written statement that Puzder, his current wife and Fierstein "are close friends today and often spend time together, but none of that context seems to matter to Andy's critics. Perpetuating these retracted 30-year-old allegations and an impulsive decision to appear on a talk show is nothing more than a desperate attempt to tarnish Andy Puzder at the expense of Lisa and their family."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In addition to the details of the tape, it's possible that additional information about Fierstein's domestic abuse allegations could be made public before Puzder's confirmation hearing.

Divorce documents that were sealed after Puzder's nomination are [being sought](#) in a lawsuit

filed by the Campaign for Accountability, a left-leaning nonprofit, which argued in a St. Louis County courtroom Tuesday afternoon that Puzder's nomination required that they be seen by the public. They might be unsealed as soon as Wednesday, according to Daniel Stevens, acting executive director of the Campaign for Accountability.

In the tape, Fierstein does not detail her accusations of physical abuse — accusations she had leveled two years earlier in a [petition](#) seeking \$350,000 in damages. In that petition, Fierstein said Puzder "assaulted and battered me by striking me violently about the face, chest, back, shoulders and neck, without provocation or cause," leaving "bruises and contusions to the chest, back, shoulders and neck" and "two ruptured discs and two bulging discs," among other injuries.

The judge in the case [dismissed the petition](#) on the grounds that Puzder's divorce agreement had already settled all of Fierstein's prior claims against him.

"I wound up losing everything, everything," Fierstein said on "Oprah." "I have nothing. He has a Porsche and a Mercedes-Benz. He has the home. He has everything. He was an attorney, and he knew how to play the system."

Fierstein spoke mostly in broad terms on "Oprah" about the effect the abuse had, she said, on herself, and the effect such abuse has on women in general.

"Most men who are in positions like that don't leave marks," Fierstein said. "The damage that I sustained you can't see. It's permanent. ... They don't hit you in the face. They're too smart. They don't hit you in front of everyone."

In response Tuesday, Thompson said: "This supports their collective claims that Andy was never physically abusive."

In a Jan. 18 [letter](#) to the HELP Committee, Fierstein said she was contacted by producers for "Oprah" after details of her divorce were made public in the St. Louis press, an apparent reference to a [1989 article](#) in the Riverfront Times detailing her abuse allegations. "They asked me to appear as a panel member to discuss the issue of adult abuse. I was hesitant but encouraged by friends and became caught up in the notion of a free trip to Chicago and being a champion of women and women's issues."

"I regret my decision to appear on that show," she wrote. "I never told Andy about it."

POLITICO obtained a copy of the tape from Charlotte Fedders, a once-famous victim of domestic abuse whose story, when it landed on the front page of The Wall Street Journal in 1985, swiftly ended then-husband John Fedders' tenure as chief of enforcement at Ronald Reagan's Securities and Exchange Commission. Charlotte Fedders appeared with Fierstein on the 1990 "Oprah" episode.

"I totally believe that she was abused," Charlotte Fedders said Tuesday. "Powerful men have a way of convincing you that they didn't do it. I do believe that she was abused."

[Back](#)

House intel chairman dismisses call for expanded Russia probe [Back](#)

By John Bresnahan and Rachael Bade | 02/15/2017 12:21 PM EDT

House Republicans are dismissing reports that Trump campaign staffers were in contact with Russia's intelligence agency during the election and downplaying calling for a select committee to investigate the matter.

House Intelligence Chairman Devin Nunes, in a Wednesday morning interview with POLITICO, reacted angrily to calls for a new probe following a New York Times bombshell report about such communications. The California Republican vowed to continue his panel's ongoing probe of Russia, but accused Democrats of politicizing the issue.

"The Democrats can play their politics all they want; they're welcome to do that, this is Washington," he said. "But as far as I'm concerned, we will continue to investigate the Russian activity like we've done for many years."

When asked about the possibility of a select committee, Nunes added: "There is not going to be one; I can tell you there is absolutely not going to be one. And I am not going to be lectured by people who are speaking out of both sides of their mouths."

Several senior House Republicans and GOP sources privately echoed those comments. The posture contrasts with that of Senate Republicans. While he did not call for an independent committee to probe the matter, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said the Russia contacts were "a significant issue."

"We are going to look at Russian involvement in the U.S. election," the Kentucky Republican said in an interview that aired Wednesday morning on MSNBC's "Morning Joe."

Democrats — and more than a few Senate Republicans — on both sides of the Capitol spent Wednesday morning ramping up pressure on Republican leaders to investigate the conversations between Trump officials and the Russian government.

But House Republicans believe Nunes' ongoing probe is sufficient enough to handle the issue. Speaker Paul Ryan, in a separate "Morning Joe" interview Wednesday, said "it's not as if the intelligence committee has not already been investigating this."

"There is no secret here: Russia has tried to meddle with our elections," he said, but added: "No one has made the claim that evidence exists that Donald Trump or his people were in on it."

A GOP source said Republican leaders are in touch with the White House about the latest report.

Another senior House Republican who did not wish to be named downplayed the need for further action in the House to investigate the matter. While the source said "there is great angst and concern about this amongst members," he added that "there's already an active investigation [of] the campaign in the intelligence community."

Trump supporters likewise are sticking with the administration. A House Republican source close with the Trump White House dismissed the news and argued that Congress should stay focused on the president's agenda.

"We support the president and we're not flinching on this one," the source said. "It's not a story playing back home. Our focus is on other issues; we have big agenda items we want to

accomplish."






Nunes, for his part, pointed to what he called President Barack Obama's unwillingness to press Russia when he was in office.

"When I came out last summer and said the biggest intelligence failure since last summer was our failure to understand Putin's plans and intentions, the administration pushed back and the intelligence agencies pushed back," Nunes said. "So, I don't need a lecture, and I'm not going to play politics with people who don't even know what they're talking about."

Jake Sherman contributed.

[Back](#)

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