

August 26, 2022

Tracy Stone-Manning
Director, Bureau of Land Management
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Director Stone-Manning:

On behalf of our nearly 5,000 member hospitals, health systems and other health care organizations, our clinician partners — including more than 270,000 affiliated physicians, 2 million nurses and other caregivers — and the 43,000 health care leaders who belong to our professional membership groups, the American Hospital Association (AHA) urges you to take steps to protect Americans' health prior to executing the final sale of the Federal Helium Reserve near Amarillo, Texas. Specifically, in order to protect the health of Americans, we urge you to act to ensure a steady supply of helium during the transfer of ownership and factor in the time it will take for full operations to be restored under new ownership.

AHA is aware that the Helium Stewardship Act of 2013 requires the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to sell the existing Federal Helium Reserve and that the process of accepting bids is already underway. We understand BLM needs to carry out its legally mandated obligations. However, since the act was adopted, changing circumstances warrant further consideration and action by the BLM prior to the sale.

As you know, helium is rare and produced mainly through extraction from natural gas. In 2013, when the Helium Stewardship Act was passed, the United States, Russia and Australia were the world's leading producers of helium, with the U.S. producing most of the helium used in this country. Since then, the war in Ukraine, concomitant restrictions on Russian exports and other events have greatly limited the world's ability to rely on Russia as a source of helium. We are deeply concerned that the transfer of ownership of the Federal Helium Reserve at this time may exacerbate the challenge of the already constrained market.

In speaking with those who work with compressed gases that are used in healthcare and other industries, we have been informed that it will take time for whomever is the successful bidder for the Federal Helium Reserve to stand up their own operations, hire workers, contract for the transport of the helium and arrange for the sale of the helium to



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customers, and that such a process likely will require months if not longer to put in place. This may leave health care facilities and other users of helium struggling to get the gas they need.

In hospitals and health systems, we principally use helium to operate our magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines and to assist patients suffering from breathing disorders, such as asthma. MRIs are essential for accurate diagnoses of many urgent or emergent health problems, including brain tumors, traumatic brain injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, dementia and other diseases. For our patients, their lives may depend on our ability to rapidly image their brains or other organs and begin treatment within minutes. Diagnoses cannot safely be put off until more helium is available, and any resulting delays in treatment may lead to increased patient suffering and possibly even death. We request your help to ensure that there is a plan in place to secure the continuous production of helium to meet critical health care needs before the sale is finalized.

We are aware that agencies in the Department of Health and Human Services are monitoring supplies of vital health care resources, such as helium, to ensure the nation's health care system can meet the care needs of communities across the country during the current public health emergency. Further, HHS has a responsibility to protect the nation's health by ensuring an effective health care delivery system. They may have information and resources that would be useful to you to ensure an effective plan for continuous operation is in place. Specifically, the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, and the Food and Drug Administration may have resources to assist you and your team in taking steps to protect American's access to helium for health care needs.

We thank you for considering our request. If we at the AHA can be of help, we would be delighted to work with BLM on this issue. Please contact me or feel free to have a member of your team contact Nancy Foster, vice president of quality and patient safety policy, at 202-626-2317 or nfoster@aha.org.

Sincerely,

/s/

Ashley Thompson

Senior Vice President, Public Policy Analysis and Development

Cc: Dr. Robert Califf, Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration
Ms. Dawn O'Connell, Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response
Ms. Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services