United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6125

WEBSITE: https://commerce.senate.gov

June 25, 2026

The Honorable Orice Williams Brown
Acting Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Acting Comptroller Brown:

In 1988, Congress on a bipartisan basis directed the Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to establish the Hollings Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) Program, a national network of go-to experts that help small and medium-sized manufacturers enhance productivity and adopt advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence.[1] The MEP Program enhances the competitiveness, productivity, and technological performance of the U.S. manufacturing sector. However, since Secretary Lutnick took control of the Department of Commerce (Department), the Department has put the future of the MEP Program and the services it provides to over 600,000 American manufacturers in deep uncertainty with an ever-shifting chronology of statements, actions, and reversals.[2] A robust investigation by GAO would help determine whether and how officials at the Department circumvented or ignored congressional directives on MEP.

NIST's annual reporting on MEP, studies commissioned by NIST,[3] and the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) prior reviews have documented the benefits that the MEP Centers provide to American manufacturers.[4] NIST's MEP Program supports manufacturers primarily through the work of MEP Centers, which are operated by various nonfederal organizations, such as nonprofit institutions, state agencies, or universities. The MEP Centers provide assistance, either directly or through third parties, to help improve manufacturing firms'

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[1] Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-418, Tit. V, pt. I, subpt. B § 5121(a) (codified as amended at 15 U.S.C. § 278k(b)). Prior to 1990, NIST was named the National Bureau of Standards. The MEP program has had different names over time but has been known as the Hollings Manufacturing Extension Partnership program since 2004.

[2] Infographic, "Manufacturing Statistics 2025", *Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy,* (Mar. 10, 2025); https://advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Manufacturing-Infographic-Series_FINAL.pdf.

[3] Pittelko, Brian, et al., "The National-Level Economic Impact of the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP): Estimates for Fiscal Year 2023", *W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research,* (Mar. 29, 2024); https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1305&context=reports.

[4] Report, "manufacturing Extension Partnership: Centers Cite Benefits from Funding Change, but Impacts Hard to Distinguish from Other Factors", *U.S. Governments Accountability Office,* (Mar. 7, 2019); https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-219.

processes and productivity, expand their capacity, utilize best management practices, and accelerate company growth.

Notwithstanding the well-documented benefits of the MEP Program, on April 1, 2025, NIST began withholding and delaying funds for MEP Centers—in violation of the funding laws Congress enacted.[5] The Department of Commerce has instead demanded MEP Centers agree to new, restrictive contractual agreements as a condition for continued federal funding, greatly reduced federal MEP Program staff levels, and generally left MEP Centers in a perpetual state of uncertainty that has led to hiring freezes and layoffs in 90 percent of MEP Centers.[6] We are deeply concerned about the impacts these actions may be having on the network of MEP Centers and their ability to support small and medium-sized manufacturers.

On December 18, 2025, 28 Senators sent a letter to NIST seeking basic information on the status of MEP funding and a briefing on NIST's intentions for operating the MEP Program.[7] On March 20, 2026, the Department sent a brief letter that failed to provide the basic information requested. Instead, the Department referenced "multiple investigations by the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General" finding "issues calling into question the MEP program's integrity" related to "limits on executive compensation" and "overstated economic impact."[8] This apparent justification for withholding MEP funds lacks credibility, as the Commerce Department's Inspector General personally confirmed to Democratic Committee staff that the OIG's findings and recommendations were not a legal or otherwise appropriate grounds for the Department to defund the MEP program.[9] Nevertheless, during a April 22, 2026, Senate Appropriations hearing, Secretary Lutnick continued to blame the Department's attacks on the MEP Program on "the Inspector General's reports"—prompting Chair Moran to voice clear skepticism about the sufficiency of that explanation.[10]

During a confirmation hearing before the Commerce Committee on March 5, 2026, the Trump Administration's nominee to be the next NIST Director, Dr. Arvind Raman, faced bipartisan questioning about how he would properly execute the MEP Program in the face of Secretary Lutnick's clear and ongoing efforts to dismantle it. Dr. Raman's testimony raised serious concerns about his knowledge of and commitment to upholding this longstanding congressional

[5] Briefing Handout, "Unauthorized MEP Shutdown: Chronology of Events, *American Small Manufacturers Coalition,* (Oct. 23, 2025); on file with Democratic Staff.
[6] Briefing, "Status of MEP", *American Small Manufacturers Coalition*, (Oct. 23, 2025); notes on file with Democratic Committee staff.
[7] Letter from Ranking Member Maria Cantwell et al., to NIST Acting Director Craig Burkhardt, (Dec. 18, 2025); https://www.commerce.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/media/doc/25.12.18%20Cantwell,%20Merkley%20+%20Dems%20to%20NIST.pdf.
[8] Letter from Acting Director Burkhardt to Ranking Member Cantwell, (Mar. 20, 2026); on file with Democratic Committee staff.
[9] Briefing, DOC Office of Inspector General, (Feb. 24, 2026); meeting notes on file with Democratic Committee staff.
[10] Hearing, "A Review of the President's Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Request for the Department of Commerce", *U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies and Homeland Security,* (Apr. 22, 2026); https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/a-review-of-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2027-budget-request-for-the-department-of-commerce.

priority. For example, when asked whether he supports the MEP Program Dr. Raman testified, "Senator, I don't know. I mean, I don't know the specifics."[11]

Although Dr. Raman's testimony on his intentions for overseeing the MEP Program was limited, his commitment to cooperating with GAO's audits and reviews of the MEP Program were unequivocal. During his hearing, Dr. Raman was asked about "cooperating with the Government Accountability Office audits," given the Commerce Department's recent refusal to cooperate with any GAO review requested by a Ranking Member – a position that is contrary to federal law and decades of practice. Dr. Raman was specifically asked if he would "commit to cooperate with all GAO audits of NIST." To his credit, Dr. Raman testified unequivocally: "Yes, Senator."[12] Given this clear testimony, and now that the Senate has confirmed Dr. Raman as the NIST Director, anything less than full cooperation by NIST with this GAO audit would amount to a breach of Dr. Raman's commitment to the United States Senate.

Given the Commerce Department's ongoing attacks on the MEP Program, its refusal thus far to provide Congress with basic information about its plans for the future of the MEP Program, and the critical role small and medium-sized manufacturers play in the U.S. economy, we request that GAO examine the following:

1. To what extent has NIST provided each Center with funding disbursements under the MEP Program, including the amounts, dates, any limitations on its use, or justifications for withholding funding?
    a. For each MEP Center, how do the amounts disbursed in 2025 and 2026 compare to previous years?
    b. What guidance or communication has NIST or the Department of Commerce provided each MEP Center on its decisions to withhold, delay, or disburse funds, and any plans for receiving future disbursements of obligated MEP funds?
    c. How has the level of uncertainty of future disbursements impact the day-to-day operations of each MEP Center?
2. What are the current terms of NIST's agreements with each MEP Center?
    a. What changes to those terms has NIST required in 2025 and 2026 compared to previous years, and what justification, if any, has been provided?
    b. How has that timing or process affected the Center's execution of the agreement and its services to manufacturers?
3. How, if at all, have MEP Centers' operations, staffing, services, or reimbursement costs changed, and how have any changes affected manufacturers?
    a. How does the financial processes of a cooperative agreement differ from that of a grant?

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[11] Press Release, "Trump NIST Nominee Faces Bipartisan Backlash Over Lutnick's Actions Undermining U.S. Investment in Manufacturing, Chips R&D", *U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation,* (Mar. 5, 2026); https://www.commerce.senate.gov/press/dem/release/trump-nist-nominee-faces-bipartisan-backlash-over-lutnick-s-actions-undermining-u-s-investment-in-manufacturing-chips-r-d/

[12] *Id.*

    b. What is the process for executing a cooperative agreement or its renewal through the NIST MEP Program and the NIST Federal Agreements Assistance Management Office?
4. What is the status of the dedicated staffing to manage the MEP Program at the Department of Commerce, and what changes have been made since January 20, 2025?
5. To what extent has NIST's or the Commerce Department's execution of the MEP Program since January 20, 2025, violated federal appropriations or any other law?

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member

Gary Peters
United States Senator