Appointment

From: Klepp, Deborah E [kleppde@state.gov]
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To: 'jerry.a.malmo@cbp.dhs.gov' [jerry.a.malmo@cbp.dhs.gov]; 'JUDITH.A.WEBSTER@cbp.dhs.gov' [JUDITH.A.WEBSTER@cbp.dhs.gov]; 'TASHA.N.SCOTT@cbp.dhs.gov' [TASHA.N.SCOTT@cbp.dhs.gov]; 'linda.j.woestendiek.civ@mail.mil' [linda.j.woestendiek.civ@mail.mil]; 'amir.gamliel.civ@mail.mil' [amir.gamliel.civ@mail.mil]; 'cynthia_perera@ios.doi.gov' [cynthia_perera@ios.doi.gov]; 'christina_kish@ios.doi.gov' [christina_kish@ios.doi.gov]; 'fatima.vanegas@cooperacion-doi.org' [fatima.vanegas@cooperacion-doi.org]; 'doi.itap.chile@gmail.com' [doi.itap.chile@gmail.com]; 'patricia_bickley@ios.doi.gov' [patricia_bickley@ios.doi.gov]; 'marc_weitzel@ios.doi.gov' [marc_weitzel@ios.doi.gov]; 'bethany_matula@ios.doi.gov' [bethany_matula@ios.doi.gov]; 'sean_lawlor@ios.doi.gov' [sean_lawlor@ios.doi.gov]; 'Karen.Wardzinski@usdoj.gov' [Karen.Wardzinski@usdoj.gov]; 'Ragu-Jara.Gregg@usdoj.gov' [Ragu-Jara.Gregg@usdoj.gov]; Pilar Velasquez [Velasquez.Pilar@dol.gov]; 'zollner.anne@dol.gov' [zollner.anne@dol.gov]; 'Cook.Katherine@dol.gov' [Cook.Katherine@dol.gov]; Barrett Joan [Barrett.Joan@dol.gov]; 'Woodhead.Halima.N@dol.gov' [Woodhead.Halima.N@dol.gov]; 'Davalos.Lorena@dol.gov' [Davalos.Lorena@dol.gov]; 'gay.chantenia@dol.gov' [gay.chantenia@dol.gov]; Quintana, Carlos G [Quintana.Carlos.G@dol.gov]; 'Wilson.Winfield@dol.gov' [Wilson.Winfield@dol.gov]; 'Muirragui.Eileen@dol.gov' [Muirragui.Eileen@dol.gov]; 'Wheeler.Jeffrey@dol.gov' [Wheeler.Jeffrey@dol.gov]; Stein, Kathie [Stein.Kathie@epa.gov]; Berrios-Colon, Nivea [Berrios-Colon.Nivea@epa.gov]; Lynch, Mary-Kay [Lynch.Mary-Kay@epa.gov]; Roseman-Orr, Ammie [Roseman-Orr.Ammie@epa.gov]; Epp, Timothy [Epp.Timothy@epa.gov]; Barnhart, Megan [barnhart.megan@epa.gov]; Heckler, David [Heckler.David@epa.gov]; Goldman, Lisa [Goldman.Lisa@epa.gov]; Wolfson, Steve [Wolfson.Steve@epa.gov]; Smith, Walker [Smith.Walker@epa.gov]; Bailey, Marianne [Bailey.Marianne@epa.gov]; Finman, Hodayah [Finman.Hodayah@epa.gov]; Besch, Brianna [besch.brianna@epa.gov]; Huber, Patrick [Huber.Patrick@epa.gov]; Torney, Maxwell [torney.maxwell@epa.gov]; Ziegler, Rick [Ziegler.Rick@epa.gov]; Harrington, Glenn [Harrington.Glenn@epa.gov]; Ankrah, Rodges [Ankrah.Rodges@epa.gov]; Vauter, Ben [Vauter.Ben@epa.gov]; Sims, JaniceHQ [Sims.JaniceHQ@epa.gov]; Ferrante, Joe [Ferrante.Joe@epa.gov]; Hill-Macon, Cam [Hill-Macon.Cam@epa.gov]; Mercurio, Cristina [Mercurio.Cristina@epa.gov]; Gonzalez, Orlando [Gonzalez.Orlando@epa.gov]; Hong, Nadtya [Hong.Nadtya@epa.gov]; Montoya, Enrique [montoya.enrique@epa.gov]; Doroski, Brenda [Doroski.Brenda@epa.gov]; Kasat, Rakhi [Kasat.Rakhi@epa.gov]; Chen, Team [chen.team@epa.gov]; Elwood, Holly [Elwood.Holly@epa.gov]; Dimas, Melissa [Dimas.Melissa@epa.gov]; 'Marks, Jamie Lee' [jamie_lee_marks@nps.gov]; 'emily_brooks@partner.nps.gov' [emily_brooks@partner.nps.gov]; Bayly, Rachel (Treasury.gov) [Rachel.Bayly@treasury.gov]; 'Kathryn.Long@treasury.gov' [Kathryn.Long@treasury.gov]; Kaplan, Leah (DCHA/DRG) [lkaplan@usaid.gov]; Afrasiabi, Mariam (DCHA/DRG/CSM) [mafrasiabi@usaid.gov]; Javed, Sofia (DCHA/DRG/CSM) [sojaved@usaid.gov]; Yerkes, Maryanne (DCHA/DRG/CSM) [myerkes@usaid.gov]; Meils, Lorri Anne (DCHA/DRG/HR) [lmeils@usaid.gov]; Lam, Vy (DCHA/DRG:AAAS) [vlam@usaid.gov]; 'Uhl, Geeta (E3/FAB' [guhl@usaid.gov]; Daut, Elizabeth F. (E3/FAB) [edaut@usaid.gov]; Tobiason, Andrew W (E3/FAB) [atobiason@usaid.gov]; Rowen, Mary (E3/FAB) [mrowen@usaid.gov]; Best, Barbara A. (E3/FAB) [bbest@usaid.gov]; Grimes, Alicia P [agrimes@usaid.gov]; Thompson, Kimberly (E3/LU) [kthompson@usaid.gov]; Bullen, Victor (E3/AA) [vbullen@usaid.gov]; Lampman, Scott (E3/AA/MDB) [slampman@usaid.gov]; Battles, Keith (LAC/SA) [kbattles@usaid.gov]; Pendzich, Christine (LAC/RSD/E) [cpendzich@usaid.gov]; Cushion, Elizabeth [ecushion@usaid.gov]; Villegas, Ana C [avillegas@usaid.gov]; Johnson, Christy (LAC/RSD) [chrjohnson@usaid.gov]; Williams, Madeline (LAC/RSD/DHR) [mawilliams@usaid.gov]; Kennison, Melissa (ASIA/EAA) [mkennison@usaid.gov]; Swaminathan, Hari K. (KINSHASA/Peace & Security) [hswaminathan@usaid.gov]; Melnyk, Mary A. (ASIA/TS) [mmelnyk@usaid.gov]; Johnson, Todd R. (ME/TS) [tjohnson@usaid.gov]; Baker, Lauren M. (PPL/P) [lbaker@usaid.gov]; Petrovic, Nada [npetrovic@usaid.gov]; 'Fry, Ashley' [ashley.fry@bia.gov]; Smith, Kristine [ktsmith@usbr.gov]; Brown, Rachel [rebrown@usbr.gov]; 'amoad@fs.fed.us' [amoad@fs.fed.us]; 'lmayhew@fs.fed.us' [lmayhew@fs.fed.us]; 'adoty@fs.fed.us' [adoty@fs.fed.us]; 'camilleamccarthy@fs.fed.us' [camilleamccarthy@fs.fed.us]; 'bryan_landry@fws.gov' [bryan_landry@fws.gov]; 'jenny_martinez@fws.gov' [jenny_martinez@fws.gov]; 'ani_cuevas@fws.gov' [ani_cuevas@fws.gov]; amanda_gonzales@fws.gov; 'yula_kapetanakos@fws.gov' [yula_kapetanakos@fws.gov]; 'stextoris@usgs.gov' [stextoris@usgs.gov]; 'pchirico@usgs.gov' [pchirico@usgs.gov]; 'Heilweil, Victor' [heilweil@usgs.gov]; 'aholland@usgs.gov' [aholland@usgs.gov]; Kunkel, Kevin T. [kkunkel@usgs.gov]; 'McCallum, Brian' [bemccall@usgs.gov]; 'Verne Schneider' [vrschnei@usgs.gov]; 'Buffo, Laura D. EOP/USTR' [Laura_Buffo@ustr.eop.gov]; Detellis, Joseph [DetellisJ@state.gov]; Harris, Susan W [HarrisSW@state.gov]; Urbina, Maria (OES-DRL) [UrbinaMA1@state.gov]; Smith, Timothy L [SmithTL2@state.gov]; Aktipis, Stephanie [AktipisS@state.gov]; Kastenberg, Rachel L [KastenbergRL@state.gov]; Hudak, Patrick M (OES) [HudakPM@state.gov]; Constantine, Henry C [ConstantineHC@state.gov]; Robinson, Randall

[RobinsonR2@state.gov]; Lurie, Mike D [LurieM@state.gov]; Winant, Edward H [WinantEH@state.gov]; Buruca, Amy I [BurucaAI@state.gov]; Roda, Maria F [RodaMF@state.gov]; Dawson, Christine L (OES) [DawsonCL@state.gov]; Nathan, Ari [NathanA@state.gov]; Karr-Colque, Catherine J (OES) [Karr-ColqueCJ@state.gov]; Arbuthnot, Anne H [ArbuthnotAH@state.gov]; Dennis, Charity F (OES) [DennisCF@state.gov]; Johnson, Amon O (Moni) [JohnsonAO@state.gov]; Thompson, Luke D [ThompsonLD@state.gov]; Scholl, Katlyn M [SchollKM@state.gov]; DeRosa-Joynt, Barbara M (OES) [DeRosaBM@state.gov]; Salzberg, Aaron A (OES) [SalzbergAA@state.gov]; Stanger, Clayton M [StangerCM@state.gov]; MacCurdy, Carol L [MacCurdyCL@state.gov]; Kobb, Shawn A [KobbSA@state.gov]; watsonrp@state.gov; Swanson, Alexandra B [SwansonAB@state.gov]; Fietzer, Nicholas C [FietzerNC@state.gov]; Shinen, Jennifer L [ShinenJL@state.gov]; Gourde, Sarah M [GourdeSM@state.gov]; Kirking Loomis, Holly [KirkingHA@state.gov]; Ahson, Nancy L [AhsonNL@state.gov]; Pratt, Aaron H [PrattAH@state.gov]; Srikanth, Shiv [SrikanthS@state.gov]; Dragisic, Christine D [DragisicCD@state.gov]; Goldberg, Catherine A [GoldbergCA@state.gov]; Doherty, Brian P [DohertyBP@state.gov]; wingrd@state.gov; Prather, Tiffany A (OES) [PratherTA@state.gov]; Morris, Neal D [MorrisND@state.gov]; Holland, Keri J [HollandKJ@state.gov]; Craig, Jeneva A [CraigJA@state.gov]; Volk, Carol J [VolkCJ@state.gov]; Fernald, Beth R [FernaldBR@state.gov]; Vaughn, Seth H [VaughnSH@state.gov]; Nichols, Elizabeth S [NicholsES@state.gov]; Dennison, Jane E [DennisonJE@state.gov]; Rajadurai, Merin [RajaduraiM@state.gov]; Allison, Christopher C (Chris) [AllisonCC@state.gov]; Ogorzalek, Stephanie [OgorzalekS@state.gov]; Elliott, John D [ElliottJD@state.gov]; Hines, Amanda D [HinesAD@state.gov]; Friedman, Daniel [FriedmanD@state.gov]; Huaracayo, Jessica M [HuaracayoJM@state.gov]; Susser, Marc J [SusserMJ2@state.gov]; Rose, Emily F [RoseEF@state.gov]; Murphy, Daniel J [MurphyDJ@state.gov]; Sherman, Lisa NK (G) [ShermanLNK@state.gov]; Kaufman, Stephen E [KaufmanSE@state.gov]; Droggitis, Christina [DroggitisCS@state.gov]; Guinn, David A [GuinnDA@state.gov]; Taylor, Denise M [TaylorDM@state.gov]; Levin, Henrietta S (USUN New York) [LevinHS@state.gov]; Cocciolone, Michael J [CoccioloneMJ@state.gov]; Davis, Patricia A [DavisPA@state.gov]; Dallmann, Carolyn Z [DallmannCZ@state.gov]; Beaufort, Allison M [BeaufortAM@state.gov]; Cunningham, Laura [CunninghamL@state.gov]; Finley, Alyson K [FinleyAK@state.gov]; Ianculovici, Ciprian [IanculoviciC@state.gov]; Mussani, Rozina D [MussaniRD@state.gov]; Anderson, Megan [AndersonME@state.gov]; Brown, Ian T [BrownIT@state.gov]; Higgins, John P (Jakarta) [HigginsJP@state.gov]; McGann, Amy L [McGannAL@state.gov]; Arendt, Christie M [ArendtCM@state.gov]; Taylor, Leslie B [TaylorLB2@state.gov]; Stein, Jennifer L [SteinJL@state.gov]; Johnson, Bryce A [JohnsonBA@state.gov]; Cordero, Barbara H [CorderoBH@state.gov]; Ramirez, Steven [RamirezJS@state.gov]; Covington, Melvin L [CovingtonML@state.gov]; Whitehead, Lindsey K [WhiteheadLK@state.gov]; Staff, Gregory S [StaffGS@state.gov]; Falcon Sapp, Luke A [FalconSappLA@state.gov]; Fuentes, Tressa A [FuentesTA@state.gov]; Ng, Alexandra C [NgAC2@state.gov]; Gritz, Laura J [GritzLJ@state.gov]; Badat, Nasreen [BadatNI@state.gov]; Grisby, Dominque S [GrisbyDS@state.gov]; Coleman, Margaret A [ColemanMA@state.gov]; DRL-WHA-Office [DRL-WHA-Office@state.gov]; Opstal, Thomas S [OpstalTS@state.gov]; Waldstein, Rachel E [WaldsteinRE@state.gov]; Roess, Ereni A [RoessEA@state.gov]; Downing, Samuel C [DowningSC@state.gov]; Ticknor, Scott B [TicknorSB@state.gov]; Suchernick, Kevin [SuchernickK@state.gov]; Yetken, Melike A [YetkenMA@state.gov]; Fierst-Walsh, Pamela D [Fierst-WalshPD@state.gov]; Orlando, Elizabeth A [OrlandoEA2@state.gov]; Cajati, George P [CajatiGP@state.gov]; Ehdaie, Beeta [EhdaieB@state.gov]; Enz, Nicholas [EnzN@state.gov]; Griffith, Simona [GriffithS@state.gov]; Keeton, John E [KeetonJE@state.gov]; Limoges, Julie M [LimogesJM@state.gov]; Rico, Salina [RicoS@state.gov]; Krill, Alan [KrillA@state.gov]; Kelly, Sonja [KellyS@state.gov]; Weyer, Jonathan C [WeyerJC@state.gov]; Kraut, Benjamin [KrautB@state.gov]; Gold, Aron F [GoldAF@state.gov]; Severino, Leah J (Khartoum) [SeverinoLJ@state.gov]; Saavedra, Mark A [SaavedraMA@state.gov]; Howe, Adrian J [HoweAJ@state.gov]; Thompson, Griffin M [ThompsonGM@state.gov]; Behar, Moises [BeharM@state.gov]; Schroeder, Jenna [SchroederJN@state.gov]; Fazio, John V [FazioJV@state.gov]; Neukam, Brandon J [NeukamBJ@state.gov]; Horn, Andrew D [HornAD@state.gov]; INL-C-WLT [INL-C-WLT@state.gov]; Spratt, Lisa P [SprattLP@state.gov]; Koogler, John [KooglerJ@state.gov]; Nightingale, Neal G [NightingaleNG@state.gov]; Felker, Fort [FelkerF@state.gov]; Welling, Judith V [WellingJV@state.gov]; Maupin, Stacey L [MaupinSL@state.gov]; Suarez, Esperanza [SuarezE@state.gov]; Brown, Vanessa N [BrownVN@state.gov]; Rains, Christopher C (Chengdu) [RainsCC@state.gov]; Danaj, Paul E [DanajPE@state.gov]; Sepulveda, Eila M [SepulvedaEM@state.gov]; Besosa, Miguel A [BesosaMA@state.gov]; INL_Colombia [INL_Colombia@state.gov]; Edwards, Kale K [EdwardsKK@state.gov]; Lee, Nathan [LeeN@state.gov]; Miller, Erica D (INL/WHP) [MillerED@state.gov]; Keen, Adrienne R [KeenAR@state.gov]; Schoonover, Rod [SchoonoverR@state.gov]; Dennison, Kristen M [DennisonKM2@state.gov]; Kerr, Katherine S [KerrKS@state.gov]; Zenzie, Charles U [ZenzieCU@state.gov]; Vincent, Andrew L [VincentAL@state.gov]; Dozler, Michael G [DozlerMG@state.gov]; Gorove, Katherine M [GOROVEKM@state.gov]; Hahs, Ona M [HahsOM@state.gov]; Benda, Susan [BENDAS@state.gov]; Landsidle, Jennifer R [LandsidleJR@state.gov]; Kill, Theodore P [KillTP@state.gov]; Youel Page, Kathryn [pageky@state.gov]; Melamud, Anna [MelamudA@state.gov]; Shellito, Haley B [ShellitoHB@state.gov]; Conn, Laura L [ConnLL@state.gov]; Eisemann, Sara [EisemannS@state.gov]; Okoko, Sadie M [OkokoSM@state.gov]; Njie, Bintou F. [NjieBF@state.gov]; Orero, Victoria A [OreroVA@state.gov]; Hardaway,

Christina ED [HardawayCED@state.gov]; Boggs, Amanda E [BoggsAE@state.gov]; Shaffer, Emily C [ShafferEC@state.gov]; Croft, Ameliah L [CroftAL@state.gov]; Moore, Navarro R [MooreNR@state.gov]; Fraser, Michael R [FraserMR@state.gov]; Wright, Derek H [WrightDH@state.gov]; Hamilton, Daniel OC [HamiltonDOC@state.gov]; Kaufman, Richard P [KaufmanRP@state.gov]; Clark, Cassandra Stuart [ClarkCS2@state.gov]; Dyess, Allison D [DyessAD@state.gov]; Hoyer, Kurt J [HoyerKJ@state.gov]; Laurent-Mantey, Deniece O [Laurent-ManteyDO@state.gov]; Casto, Jennifer A [CastoJA@state.gov]; Waye, Ryan M [WayeRM@state.gov]; Evans, Peter O [EvansPO1@state.gov]; Bakewell, Richard A [BakewellRA@state.gov]; Bazil, Drew D [Bazildd@state.gov]; Rajan, Thu N [RajanTN@state.gov]; Tatsis, Alexander [TatsisA@state.gov]; Geesaman, Noah [GeesamanN@state.gov]; Colombini, Paul C [ColombiniPC@state.gov]; Sanford, Scott R [SanfordSR@state.gov]; Damour, Marie C [DamourMC@state.gov]; Blackwood, Richard C [BlackwoodRC@state.gov]; Grandison, Gayshiel F [GrandisonGF@state.gov]; Quinzio, Sarah R (Wellington) [QuinzioSR@state.gov]; An, Moses [AnM@state.gov]; Chanin, Geoffrey D (Geoff) [ChaninGD@state.gov]; Duvall, Linnea [DuvallL@state.gov]; Brown, Kelly E [BrownKE@state.gov]; Ventling, Angel R [VentlingAR@state.gov]; Silkworth, William R [SilkworthWR2@state.gov]; Younes, David W [YounesDW@state.gov]; Hays, Clayton P [HaysCP@state.gov]; Leonard, Katherine Wiehagen [LeonardKW@state.gov]; Colon, Vanessa D [ColonVD@state.gov]; Gray, John H [GrayJH@state.gov]; Stratton, Rory W [strattonRW@state.gov]; Pfleiderer, Jessica B [PfleidererJB@state.gov]; Evans, Jason D [EvansJD@state.gov]; Connorton, Ellen [ConnortonE@state.gov]; Craig, Sara M [CraigS@state.gov]; WHAColombia Desk Officers [WHAColombiaDeskOfficers@state.gov]; Reid, Ryan M [ReidRM@state.gov]; Russell, Christine M [RussellCM2@state.gov]; Escarne, Acquania G [EscarneAG@state.gov]; Mathur, Sarah L [MathurSL@state.gov]; Sipes, Samuel D [SipesSD@state.gov]; Putnam, Kate M [PutnamKM@state.gov]; Milojkovic, Bojana [MilojkovicB@state.gov]; Silensky, Valerie M [SilenskyVM@state.gov]; Bedsworth, Brian C [BedsworthBC@state.gov]; Trinh, Cyndee-Nga [TrinhC@state.gov]; Sparks, Tyler K [SparksTK@state.gov]; Hess, Benjamin G [HessBG@state.gov]; Perrin, Roy A [PerrinRA@state.gov]; Tagle, David G [TagleDG@state.gov]; Moreno, Juliana L [MorenoJL1@state.gov]; Kenoyer, Steven M [KenoyerSM@state.gov]; Diaz, Rafael [DiazR1@state.gov]; Hamilton, James N [HamiltonJN@state.gov]; Webb, Roger C [WebbRC@state.gov]; Macklin, Nathan L [MacklinNL@state.gov]; Fabrico, Stefanie L [FabricoSL@state.gov]; Hoey, Colleen A [HoeyCA@state.gov]; McNamara, John T [McNamaraJT@state.gov]; Moore, Thomas W [MooreTW3@state.gov]; Veras, Karina [veraska@state.gov]; Sprow, Gregory B [SprowGB@state.gov]; Kjelland, Christopher D [KjellandCD@state.gov]; Stiansen, Kiersten A [StiansenKA2@state.gov]; Cabello, Olga A [CabelloOA@state.gov]; Pals, Arie T [PalsAT@state.gov]; Hintz-Tate, Kary [Hintz-TateK@state.gov]; Spiceland, Tristan M [SpicelandTM@state.gov]; Sjoblom, Kerri A [SjoblomKA@state.gov]; Ruppel, Emily A [RuppelEA@state.gov]; Munoz, Jennie V [MunozJV@state.gov]; Jeffrey, Thomas B [JeffreyTB@state.gov]; Miller, Scott A (WHA/PPC) [MillerSA@state.gov]; OES-Regional Hubs-DG [OES-RegionalHubs-DG@state.gov]; McElligott, Margaret [McElligottM@state.gov]; Jovanovic, Heidi-Hakone L [JovanovicHH@state.gov]; Thomas, Shannon T [ThomasSB@state.gov]; Chapman, Andrew S [ChapmanAS@state.gov]; Ruiz, Mariana [RuizM1@state.gov]; Wilson, Rachel [WilsonRX@state.gov]; Daley, Rebecca S [DaleyRS@state.gov]; Ortenzi, Kathryn McLean [OrtenziKM@state.gov]; Guardo, Andrea (BOGOTA/DRG) [aguardo@usaid.gov]; Hamner, Todd (BOGOTA/ENV) [thamner@usaid.gov]; Waytoti, Emily (BOGOTA/ENV) [ewaytoti@usaid.gov]; Howlett, David S. [dhowlett@usaid.gov]; Black, Thomas [tblack@usaid.gov]; Vargas, Gustavo (BOGOTA/ENV) [gvargas@usaid.gov]; So, Frank J. (BOGOTA/FO) [fso@usaid.gov]; Valdez, Pablo M [ValdezPM2@state.gov]; Jordan, Samantha A [JordanS@state.gov]; Smith, Jason H [SmithJH@state.gov]; Anna Toness (USAID/BRAZIL/ENV) [atoness@usaid.gov]; 'Mancuso, Alexandre (USAID/BRAZIL/ENV' [amancuso@usaid.gov]; Garcia, Michael [GarciaM4@state.gov]; Jensen, Brian D [JensenBD@state.gov]; Quevedo, Adriana [QuevedoA@state.gov]; Toledo, Ricardo [ToledoLR@state.gov]; Barr, Kimberly S [barrks@state.gov]; Johnson-Miller, Amanda [Johnson-MillerA@state.gov]; Powers, Elizabeth M [PowersEM@state.gov]; Roberts, Jason C [RobertsJC2@state.gov]; Romo, Monica (PERU/EGE) [mromo@usaid.gov]; Torres, Beatriz (PERU/EGT) [btorres@usaid.gov]; Sarmiento, Carmela (PERU/HEO) [csarmiento@usaid.gov]; Cady, Gina [gcady@usaid.gov]; Baldwin, Jennifer A. (PERU/ESG) [jbaldwin@usaid.gov]; Zamgochian, Ani (PERU/ENR) [azamgochian@usaid.gov]; Cavero, Poupee(PERU/EGT) [pcavero@usaid.gov]; Holmgren, Erik J (Mexico City) [HolmgrenEJ@state.gov]; Horowitz, Nina E (Mexico City) [HorowitzNE@state.gov]; Wesen, Chad J [WesenCJ@state.gov]; Golland, Jesse P (Mexico City) [GollandJP@state.gov]; Kutzley, Rachel R (Mexico City) [KutzleyRR@state.gov]; Hines, R. Arturo (Ciudad Juarez) [HinesRA3@state.gov]; Morales, Patricia R (Ciudad Juarez) [MoralesPR@state.gov]; Garcia, Ariana A [GarciaAA5@state.gov]; Hill, John J [hilljj@state.gov]; Dunlap, Ellen M [DunlapEM@state.gov]; Tibbetts, Robert E [TibbettsRE@state.gov]; Rioja-Scott, Isabel E (Panama) [Rioja-ScottIE@state.gov]; Johnson, Brittney (Panama) [JohnsonB2@state.gov]; Zuluaga, Lindsey M [ZuluagaL@state.gov]; Griffin, Andrew A (Santiago) [GriffinAA@state.gov]; Alfaqih, Mazin T (Tegucigalpa) [AlfaqihMT@state.gov]; Rettenmayer, Nathaniel D (Tegucigalpa) [RettenmayerND@state.gov]; Gromovich, Greta (Tegucigalpa) [GromovichG@state.gov]; Klinger, Nicholas A [klingerna@state.gov]; Michelow, Adam L (Tegucigalpa) [MichelowAL@state.gov]; Miller, Lisa D (Tegucigalpa) [MillerLD@state.gov]; Rettenmayer, Mai (Katelyn) (Tegucigalpa) [RettenmayerMV@state.gov]; Dupuis,

Sheryl S (Tegucigalpa) [DupuisSS@state.gov]; Rivera, Maria G (USAID/H/DG) [marivera@usaid.gov]; Bach, James (USAID/H/DG) [jbach@usaid.gov]; Bian, Rain Che (Guatemala) [BianRC@state.gov]; Nelson, Erica L [NelsonEL@state.gov]; Bushby, Kristin C [BushbyKC@state.gov]; Cartelli, Anthony C (Guatemala) [CartelliAC@state.gov]; Nelson, Tobin H [NelsonTH@state.gov]; Wheeler, Cassandra (GUATEMALA/DG) [cwheeler@usaid.gov]; Wallace, Annie [awallace@usaid.gov]; Robles, Teresa (GUATEMALA/EG) [trobles@usaid.gov]; Garcia, Patricia (GUATEMALA/EG) [pgarcia@usaid.gov]; Jimenez, Ajbee [ajimenez@usaid.gov]; Stevens, Jacob D (Managua) [StevensJD1@state.gov]; Kaetzer-Hodson, Katherine D [Kaetzer-HodsonKD@state.gov]; Nyce, Christopher M (Addis Ababa) [NyceC@state.gov]; Kelsey, Jonathan [KelseyJ@state.gov]; Krzywda, David A [KrzywdaDA@state.gov]; Schulze, DeMark F (Kampala) [SchulzeDF@state.gov]; Hunter, Rebecca K (Kampala) [HunterRK@state.gov]; Tramontozzi, Lucas (Kampala) [TramontozziL@state.gov]; Tsekos-Velez, Mary E (Kampala) [Tsekos-VelezME@state.gov]; Saulys, Dovas A (Kinshasa) [SaulysDA@state.gov]; McNeilage, Alastair (KINSHASA/CARPE) [amcneilage@usaid.gov]; Moore, Meghan M [MooreMM2@state.gov]; Clark, Colette M [ClarkCM@state.gov]; Merrin, Richard C [MerrinRC@state.gov]; Dando, Lori P [DandoLP@state.gov]; Carl, Daniel J [CarlDJ@state.gov]; Maroney, Hagen D [MaroneyHD@state.gov]; Sykes, Sherry Zalika [SykesSZ@state.gov]; Burns, Roberta R (Pretoria) [BurnsRR@state.gov]; Choi, John Y (Bangkok) [ChoiJY@state.gov]; Levant, Shaleah M (Bangkok) [LevantSM@state.gov]; Anderson, Erik M (Bangkok) [AndersonEM@state.gov]; Wald, Daniel P (Beijing) [WaldDP@state.gov]; Chynoweth, James P (Hanoi) [ChynowethJP@state.gov]; McInerney, Jason (Hanoi) [McInerneyJ@state.gov]; Wharton, Elizabeth S (Jakarta) [WhartonES@state.gov]; Fox, Nicole P (Manila) [FoxNP@state.gov]; Breuhaus, Brian J [BreuhausBJ@state.gov]; McGregor, John D [McGregorJI@state.gov]; Morris, Joshua C (Manila) [MorrisJC@state.gov]; Hudspeth, Brandon A (Manila) [HudspethBA@state.gov]; Lehrer, Jeffrey A. [jlehrer@usaid.gov]; Diallo, Jenna (PHIL/OEDG) [jdiallo@usaid.gov]; Porta, Gerardo (Philippines/OEDG) [gporta@usaid.gov]; Orca, Mercy Ria (Philippines/OEDG) [morca@usaid.gov]; Sequeira, David R [SequeiraDR@state.gov]; Spiller, Cory S [SpillerCS@state.gov]; Wyche, David L (Seoul) [WycheDL@state.gov]; Reed, Stephanie L [ReedSL@state.gov]; Elder-Ratutokarua, Maria B [ElderMB@state.gov]; Pavek, Melinda M [pavekmm@state.gov]; Joseph, Jeffrey C [JosephJC@state.gov]; Dubrovsky, Konstantin [DubrovskyK@state.gov]; Long, Iverson B (Dhaka) [LongIB@state.gov]; Broadbent, Peter W [BroadbentPW@state.gov]; Commins, Christopher J [CominsCJ@state.gov]; Srivastava, Ravindra M [SrivastavaRM@state.gov]; Ghose, Priya [GhoseP@state.gov]; Rao, Hina [RaoH@state.gov]; Moo, David [MooD@state.gov]; Greengrass, Sara D [GreengrassSD@state.gov]; Litke, Sara L [LitkeSL@state.gov]; Bowles, Ryan E (Amman) [BowlesRE@state.gov]; Smith, Jason A [SmithJA6@state.gov]; Green, Christopher L [GreenCL2@state.gov]; Malenas, Laura A (Berlin) [MalenasLA2@state.gov]; Bennett, Katia J (Budapest) [BennettKJ@state.gov]; Wheeler, Stephen S (Copenhagen) [WheelerSS@state.gov]; Brownlow, Dena D (London) [BrownlowDD@state.gov]; Checklick, Nancy (London) [ChecklickN1@state.gov]; Behnke, Lynette (London) [BehnkeL@state.gov]; Ayala, Mateo M [AyalaMM@state.gov]; Weatherall, Thomas [WeatherallT@state.gov]; Limaye, Viki (USEU) [LimayeYV@state.gov]; 'colleenrodonnell@gmail.com' [colleenrodonnell@gmail.com]; 'carolvolk@rocketmail.com' [carolvolk@rocketmail.com]; Turnell, Roger (INL, no SBU) [roger_turnell@fws.gov]

Subject: Env Def IAWG meeting with 2019 Goldman Environmental Prize Winner for Africa - Alfred Brownell from Liberia
Attachments: image003.jpg
Location: State Dept - HST - Rm 3940, or conference number tel: Ex. 6 Personal Privacy (PP)

Start: 5/1/2019 5:00:00 PM
End: 5/1/2019 6:30:00 PM
Show Time As: Tentative

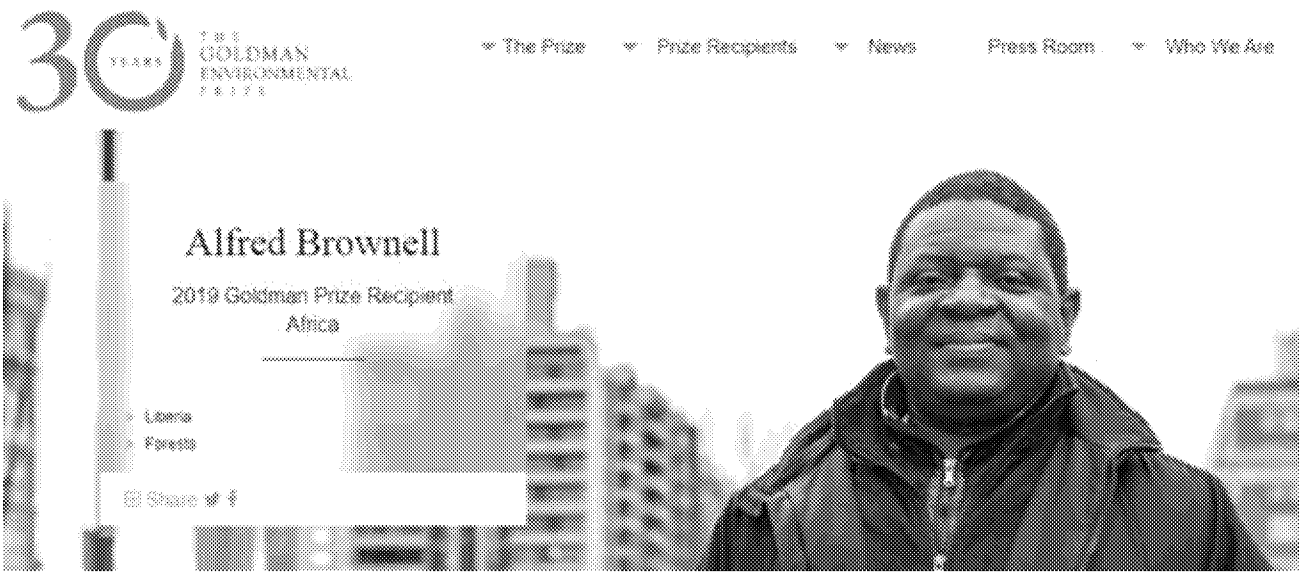
Recurrence: (none)

Dear Members of the Interagency Working Group to reduce violence against Environmental Defenders (IAWG),
The Goldman Environmental Prize announced its six 2019 winners this morning (https://www.goldmanprize.org/blog/introducing-the-2019-goldman-environmental-prize-winners/). ***This Wednesday, May 1 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Eastern time***, the IAWG has the honor of meeting Alfred Brownell, this year's Prize winner for Africa https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/alfred-brownell/. Information about Mr. Brownell and his achievements from the Goldman Environmental Prize is at the bottom of this message.

This meeting will be of particular interest to IAWG members who work on Liberia or Africa, issues of deforestation, palm oil, biodiversity, rule of law, human rights defenders, and/or indigenous land concerns. Would you please rsvp by tomorrow close of business whether you are able to attend? And for our interagency members, please email me whether you will attend in person and need to be pre-cleared or whether you will call in.

Best,
Deborah

Deborah Klepp
Senior Advisor for Environment
Front Office
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES/E)
Email: kleppde@state.gov
tel: 202-485-2984



Under threat of violence, environmental lawyer and activist Alfred Brownell stopped the clear-cutting of Liberia's tropical forests by palm oil plantation developers. His campaign protected 513,500 acres of primary forest that constitute one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots, enabling indigenous communities to continue their stewardship of the forest. For his safety, he is living in temporary exile in the United States.

Agro-industrial assault on the rainforests

The Upper Guinean forest, a stretch of rainforest from Sierra Leone to Nigeria, has been classified as one of the 25 most important biodiversity hotspots on the planet. These lush tropical forests act as essential carbon sinks and are critical habit for numerous endangered species—including chimpanzees, pygmy hippopotamuses, and tree pangolins—and for West Africa's largest population of elephants.

Liberia's forests ("the lungs of West Africa") are acutely threatened by the government's aggressive push for economic development through large concessions to mining, timber, and palm oil companies. During her long reign, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signed over roughly 30% of Liberia's land to outside investors. The

government claimed un-deeded land customarily held by indigenous peoples as public land, making community forests vulnerable to destruction by massive agro-industrial and mining projects.

In 2010, Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL), a Southeast Asia-based agro-industrial company, signed a deal with the Liberian government for a 65-year lease of 543,600 acres of forestland to develop palm oil operations. To establish palm oil plantations, GVL cleared community forests and sacred sites without notice or adequate compensation. In the process, GVL destroyed farmlands and polluted local water sources, endangering the communities' fresh water supply and harming their culture and livelihood. When residents spoke out against the destruction, GVL received support from Liberian authorities, who harassed, threatened, and arbitrarily detained residents without charge.

An advocate for environmental justice

Alfred Brownell, 53, is an environmental and human rights lawyer and executive director of Green Advocates (GA), a Liberian NGO that he founded in order to represent communities seeking to protect their environmental and human rights. Brownell also established a network to connect community-based organizations throughout Liberia—the Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD)—to collaborate on environmental justice work. He grew up in Robertsport, Liberia, and studied science, agriculture, and law at university.

Taking matters into his own hands

In 2011, when Brownell became aware of GVL's destruction of the forest, he was horrified and got to work with local communities to halt the land grabbing and environmental devastation. Brownell knew that GVL depends on its certification with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)—the global certification body for palm oil—to obtain financing and sell its palm oil. Without such certification, GVL cannot sell to major buyers—such as Unilever and Cargill, which have agreed to purchase only sustainably produced palm oil—and may be unable to finance its operations.

In October 2012, Brownell worked with community members to file a complaint with RSPO, detailing GVL's environmental malpractice. In response, RSPO placed a stop work order on GVL, freezing any expansion of the palm oil plantation and preventing them from clearing more forest and harassing local communities further. Brownell's action protected 513,500 acres—roughly 94% of the forest leased to GVL.

Meanwhile, in 2014, as an Ebola crisis killed thousands of Liberians, the government declared a state of emergency, restricting travel and public meetings in order to contain the outbreak. During the crisis, GVL signed four agreements with Sinoe County and neighboring communities to develop 33,000 acres into palm oil plantations. In exchange, GVL promised jobs and other community benefits. Each of the four agreements was signed by hundreds of people, indicating that GVL brought together large groups of people, an activity that had been explicitly banned because of the Ebola epidemic.

In May 2015, after GVL failed to deliver the promised jobs and community benefits, angry community members protested at the local GVL office, leading to violent clashes. In the aftermath, police ransacked homes and made arbitrary arrests. Fifteen community members were held in custody, and one of them died under mysterious circumstances. After a year of legal wrangling, Brownell, with the support of public defenders, was able to secure the release of the 14 jailed community members.

Brownell brought in international NGOs, watchdogs, and media to investigate GVL's deforestation and lack of community consent in the process, and RSPO issued a new report that intensely criticized GVL and found that it was continuing to strong-arm community members.

In July 2018, RSPO dismissed GVL's appeal against the stop work order, upholding Brownell's complaint. His efforts prevented the clearing of 513,500 acres of land that sequesters carbon, shelters endangered species—

including elephants, chimpanzees, pygmy hippopotamuses, and tree pangolins—and is part of the Upper Guinean biodiversity hotspot.

Victory has come at a price, as Brownell and his family were forced to flee Liberia—in dramatic fashion—and take temporary refuge in the United States. Threatened with his life and disparaged by the Sirleaf Johnson administration as an anti-development agitator and economic saboteur, he has been attacked at home because of his work. Brownell is currently a distinguished scholar and research associate professor in the School of Law at Northeastern University in Boston. He is still actively involved in environmental activism in Liberia and hopes to return to his native land.