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Zinke vows to restore 'breaches,' keep NPS despite reorg

Jennifer Yachnin, E&E News reporter
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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke (left) speaks with Utah Gov. Gary Herbert (R) and his wife on the sidelines of the Western Governors' Association conference today. @SecretaryZinke/Twitter

WHITEFISH, Mont. — Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said today that his agency must "restore trust" in the federal government's ability to manage public lands — while slamming Obama-era policies on developers paying for harm to species and promising his overhaul of the department would be on a "100-year scale."

In brief remarks here at the Western Governors' Association annual meeting, Zinke lamented what he views as a dysfunctional relationship among federal land managers, residents and business.

"Particularly out West, there seems to be a breach of trust," Zinke said. "Some is the political arena that we live in today, but there's a trust between the people and our government in some places that's breached."

He then pointed to the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees 258 million surface acres and nearly 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate.

"It bothers me when BLM is not viewed as land managers but are viewed as more law enforcement," Zinke said. "It bothers me to go out to our holdings where citizens don't trust their government to be the stewards. And frankly, in the past, there's been some breaches."

Zinke highlighted an unspecified \$3 billion lease in Alaska that was relocated at the direction of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

He did not identify the project but was likely referring to an effort by Royal Dutch Shell PLC to drill exploration wells in Alaska's remote Chukchi Sea. The wells in that project would have violated a Fish and Wildlife marine mammal rule issued in 2013 that required well spacing of at least 15 miles (*E&E News PM*, June 23, 2015).

Zinke did not raise other disputes with BLM, such as the 2014 incident in which armed ranchers and militia blocked federal law enforcement officers from removing Cliven Bundy's cattle from public lands where they had been illegally grazing.

But Zinke did spend time lambasting the process of "compensatory mitigation," which dictates how land developers can pay for damage to protected species or their habitats, noting that some critics see the process as "extortion."

"I call it un-American," said Zinke, adding that he called for a review of the compensatory mitigation process in a secretarial order earlier this year. "We have to restore trust."

Zinke also briefly touched on his planned overhaul of Interior, vowing that the reorganization effort would be "on a scale of 100 years."

"We're going to address how to be more joint," he said. "We're still going to keep the Park Service and the Forest Service, because there is great value in keeping tradition."

The Forest Service is under the Agriculture Department.

No changes to Mont. monument

In a news conference after his remarks, Zinke revealed that he will not recommend any changes to the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in Montana, one of dozens of such sites under review by the Trump administration.

"My likely recommendation will be to leave the Missouri Breaks as is," Zinke said. He later added: "In the case of Missouri Breaks, I think it's settled to a degree, and I'd rather not open up a wound that has been healed."

Zinke is reviewing 27 national monuments under an executive order issued by President Trump in late April to assess all monuments created since 1996 that encompass at least 100,000 acres.

In an interim report earlier this month, Zinke advocated for unspecified reductions to Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah, but he is not scheduled to submit a final report until Aug. 24.

Echoing remarks he made to congressional lawmakers last week, Zinke acknowledged that not all 27 monuments are actively under scrutiny.

"Not all the monuments are under review," he said. Last week, he told Colorado Sen. Cory Gardner (R) that the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument is not on his agency's "priority review" list (*E&E News PM*, June 22).

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