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CALIFORNIA

Trump's pick for Interior post has ties to controversial desert groundwater project

The Desert Sun, April 28

President Donald Trump on Friday chose lobbyist and former Bush administration official David Bernhardt as his nominee to become deputy Interior secretary, drawing criticism from conservationists who said the lawyer's history of representing oil companies and agricultural interests raises troubling questions about potential conflicts of interest. Bernhardt has led Trump's transition team for the Interior Department and is a shareholder of the law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP, where he has represented energy and mining companies and lobbied for California's Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water agency in the country. *See PDF for full story.*

Cadiz Inc. plan a vetted project that will bring jobs, water security

The Desert Sun, April 26

Earlier this month, the Interior Department reversed course on a controversial policy that blocked the development of much needed infrastructure, water and jobs in Southern California, including the Cadiz Valley Water Conservation, Recovery & Storage Project. The Cadiz Water Project is a public-private partnership of Cadiz Inc. and Southern California public water agencies that will capture and conserve groundwater presently lost to evaporation at Cadiz Inc.'s private agricultural property in the Mojave Desert and make it available as a new water supply for 400,000 Southern Californians. *See PDF for full story.*

Trump executive order puts Berryessa Snow Mountain at risk

Record-Bee, opinion, May 4

In 2015, I attended a ceremony at the White House celebrating the Obama Administration's designation of Berryessa Snow Mountain Conservation Area as a National Monument. Over the previous several years, Congressman Mike Thompson and I, together with my fellow members of Congress, worked to shepherd this along. But this designation was the culmination of many years of effort by local officials, as well as conservationists and recreation enthusiasts—all of whom pulled together to make it happen. We thought we had permanently set aside this federal land for recreation,

tourism, hunting, and fishing, and had preserved its unique habitats, rare plants, diverse wildlife, and expansive trails for future generations. Unfortunately, under an Executive Order signed by President Trump, all the progress we made protecting Berryessa Snow Mountain might be lost.

National Monument north of Highway 33 explodes in natural beauty

VC Reporter, May 3

I drove through the night anticipating what the following morning would reveal. Envisioning a palette of vibrant colors splashed across its rolling mountains and sweeping grasslands, the Carrizo Plain National Monument never disappoints. As sun rose above the Temblor Range to the east, shadows retreated across the plain, revealing what I had hoped for. Soon I was bewildered by the strength in color: four shades of yellow, then patches of orange, a sea of purple, some sprinkling of blues, swaths of pinks and whites. It was everything I had imagined along with a few surprises following the wettest winter in years.

BLM freezes central Calif. leasing in deal with enviros

ENERGYWIRE, May 4

The Trump administration will pause oil and gas leasing on thousands of acres of public lands in California while it takes a closer look at the impacts of hydraulic fracturing. The leasing freeze is part of a settlement finalized yesterday with environmental groups that sued the Interior Department and the Bureau of Land Management over development plans around Bakersfield. The groups brought their challenge in 2015, arguing that a resource management plan and related environmental impact statement (EIS) prepared under the Obama administration failed to consider the effects of fracking on more than 1 million acres in California's central region. *See PDF for full story.*

NATIONAL

BLM transfer provision in omnibus outrages advocates

E&E News, May 4

The omnibus spending package the Senate approved today contains a provision that would make it easier for the Bureau of Land Management to adopt out or transfer wild horses and burros, reducing the growing number of animals under the agency's care. But the provision has angered animal rights advocates, who say it contains too many loopholes to protect thousands of wild horses and burros from being slaughtered. *See PDF for full story.*

A Monumental Cave-In

The American Prospect, May 5

On his first day on the job in Washington, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke rode to his new office on a National Park Service horse. Next week, he heads to Utah for another horse-powered photo op through the tougher terrain of the Bears Ears, which President Obama designated a national monument. "I'm going to ride a horse, like Teddy Roosevelt, and see the land and talk to the Navajo and the nations of tribes," Zinke said.

Industry groups praise Secretary Zinke in open letter

Boating Industry, May 4

In an open letter published yesterday in the Wall Street Journal, executives from the marine industry joined a group more than 100 outdoor recreation industry companies praised the agenda being set by Department of the Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke during the first 100 days of Donald Trump's presidency. These executives represent many segments of the \$887 billion outdoor recreation industry including the shooting, hunting, archery, camping, fishing, marine, motorcycle, powersports, hospitality and recreation vehicle sectors. In the letter, the industry shares its excitement to work with Secretary Zinke, a strong supporter of outdoor recreation. Since his confirmation, Secretary Zinke has been working closely with the Outdoor Recreation Industry Roundtable to increase access to recreational opportunities and enjoyment on all federal lands and waters.

American Standoff Illuminates Oregon Armed Occupation

World Net Daily, May 4

Some condemned it as "militia terrorism" at its worst, while others saw in it American courage and rebellion against tyranny at its best. But where in this continuum does the truth lie? A new primetime film documentary, featuring interviews with virtually all the key players, shines a bright light on what really was behind the 41-day armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in rural Eastern Oregon that erupted in early 2016, ending in mass arrests only after law enforcement fatally shot one of the occupiers...Possibly President Donald Trump's recent executive order on "national monuments" a designation his predecessor Barack Obama used to lock up literally millions of acres in western states for the federal government will help defuse the longstanding tensions between America's ranchers and the government.

Supporters of Bundy-case defendants rally at Nevada prison

The Salt Lake Tribune, May 3

Supporters of Nevada rancher and states' rights figure Cliven Bundy and his sons went to a federal detention center to protest conditions in which defendants are being held while awaiting trial in federal court in Las Vegas. A rally organizer and spokesman, Doug Knowles, says the demonstration Wednesday at the Nevada Southern Detention Center in Pahrump follows the filing of a civil lawsuit last week by son Ryan Bundy. The lawsuit alleges that detainees' constitutional rights are being violated by frequent strip searches and periods of lockdown in disciplinary segregation. Cliven Bundy, sons Ammon and Ryan Bundy, and several other defendants are due for trial June 26 on

charges in a 2014 armed standoff that stopped federal agents from enforcing confiscating Bundy cows from public rangeland near the family ranch.

[Agency suspends advisory panels even as decisions loom](#)

GREENWIRE, May 5

The Interior Department is formally reviewing the "charter and charge" of more than 200 advisory panels that assist federal agencies managing hundreds of millions of acres of public lands at a time when the Trump administration is considering significant changes to land-use designations and management practices. The Bureau of Land Management has told members of its 30 resource advisory councils (RACs) to postpone scheduled meetings through at least September as part of the new national review of Interior's advisory panels, both internal and external. *See PDF for full story.*

[National parks and lands: Contest-winning photos](#)

USA Today, May 4

The U.S. Department of the Interior has announced the winners for their annual Share the Experience photo contest. Each year, the Department of the Interior invites visitors to the lands run by the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service to submit their favorite photos, with winners chosen in several categories. This past year's contest categories included Historic, Adventure, Night Skies, Scenic, Wildlife and Fan Favorite, as well as third, second and grand prize winners overall.

[Noise pollution turns up the volume in America's parks](#)

USA Today, May 4

America's natural places, supposedly the last bastions of peace and quiet, are contaminated by the sound of honking cars, roaring jet engines and other noise, scientists found. Sixty-three percent of protected areas in the continental United States suffer from significant human-caused noise, according to a study in this week's *Science*. The protected areas ranged from national forests sprawling over millions of acres to local parks.

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CALIFORNIA

Trump's pick for Interior post has ties to controversial desert groundwater project

The Desert Sun, April 28

President Donald Trump on Friday chose lobbyist and former Bush administration official David Bernhardt as his nominee to become deputy Interior secretary, drawing criticism from conservationists who said the lawyer's history of representing oil companies and agricultural interests raises troubling questions about potential conflicts of interest.

Bernhardt has led Trump's transition team for the Interior Department and is a shareholder of the law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP, where he has represented energy and mining companies and lobbied for California's Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water agency in the country.

Bernhardt has led Trump's transition team for the Interior Department and is a shareholder of the law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP, where he has represented energy and mining companies and lobbied for California's Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water agency in the country.

He leads the firm's Natural Resources Department, which also includes fellow shareholder Scott Slater, the president and CEO of Cadiz Inc., which is pursuing a controversial plan to pump groundwater in the Mojave Desert and sell it to Southern California cities.

Critics said Bernhardt's nomination flies in the face of Trump's campaign pledges to "drain the swamp" and clean up Washington.

"David Bernhardt is a walking conflict of interest," said Aaron Weiss, media director for the Center for Western Priorities, a Denver-based advocacy group. "He would need to recuse himself from any discussions or decisions involving Cadiz, involving Westlands Water District, involving the offshore clients he has worked with. It is a very long list."

If confirmed as deputy secretary, Bernhardt would help lead a department that oversees the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Fish and Wildlife Service and other divisions with responsibility for managing dams and administering 245 million acres of public lands – about one-tenth of the country's land area.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said that Bernhardt's experience both in government and in his legal work "is exactly what is needed to help streamline government and make the Interior and our public lands work for the American economy."

Conservation activists, however, said they expect Bernhardt would be an advocate for more oil and gas drilling and mining who would also weaken protections on endangered species.

Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said it's concerning that Bernhardt's law firm has a financial interest in the Cadiz water project, which would involve pumping groundwater from an aquifer in the Mojave Desert and building a 43-mile pipeline along a railroad line to send the water to cities.

Courtney Degener, Cadiz's vice president of communications and external relations, said Bernhardt has never lobbied on behalf of the company.

Still, some environmentalists said they suspected Bernhardt played a role when the Interior Department announced a policy change last month that could facilitate the project. Under that change, the agency scrapped guidelines on how federal officials should evaluate the uses of public lands running alongside railroads.

Anderson, who has fought the Cadiz project for years, said she thinks the recent change in the agency's position is "undoubtedly a direct result of Mr. Bernhardt's influence."

Weiss pointed to records showing the Brownstein law firm owns shares in Cadiz and has an agreement under which the company would gain more shares if the water project is completed.

Asked about that agreement, Lara Day of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck said in an email that the law firm doesn't comment on its financial arrangements with clients.

Bernhardt's nomination must be confirmed by the Senate. If confirmed, he would be bound to comply with federal ethics standards.

Bernhardt worked as a lawyer and lobbyist for the Brownstein firm before he joined the Interior Department under President George W. Bush in 2001. After holding several positions, including deputy solicitor and deputy chief of staff, he was confirmed by the Senate in 2006 as the department's solicitor – the agency's top lawyer.

He returned to the law firm in 2009 and was involved in lobbying until November, when he terminated his registration as a lobbyist for Westlands and joined the Trump transition team.

Records list \$32,150 in political contributions from Bernhardt to Republicans in 2015 and 2016, including to Sen. John McCain of Arizona and Sen. Dan Sullivan of Alaska, as well as members of Congress such as David Valadao and Paul Cook of California, and Rob Bishop of Utah.

Valadao said on Twitter on Friday that Bernhardt “is a dedicated public servant w/the knowledge and expertise to effectively serve as Deputy Secretary.”

Bernhardt’s law firm also has a political action committee that records show made \$265,500 in political contributions to federal candidates in 2016, with 66 percent of the contributions going to Republicans and 34 percent to Democrats.

The Center for Biological Diversity said in a statement that Bernhardt has represented a “who’s-who of special interests,” from energy companies to Rosemont Copper, which is seeking to develop a copper mine in the Santa Rita Mountains in Arizona. The conservation group also noted that Bernhardt’s lobbying for the Westlands Water District has focused on legislation relating to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta that would benefit large agricultural businesses to the detriment of endangered fish.

Brett Hartl, the center’s government affairs director, expressed concern that Bernhardt would be a “go-to guy” for Republicans such as Bishop, who has called for repealing the Endangered Species Act.

“In his long career taking advantage of the revolving-door of special interests, Bernhardt has always sided with big business at the expense of our most imperiled wildlife,” Hartl said. “If confirmed he’d be a disaster for all endangered species.”

Republican allies defended Bernhardt’s record. Former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne described him as thoughtful and fair, saying he was widely respected within the agency for his leadership and management skill.

During the confirmation hearings, though, he’s likely to face questions about the companies he has represented and how he intends to avoid conflicts of interest.

Kate Kelly, a former senior adviser to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell during the Obama administration, called Bernhardt’s nomination troubling.

“He is going to be working on policies affecting clients for whom he lobbied just months ago,” said Kelly, now public lands director at the Center for American Progress, a research and advocacy organization.

“We need to understand what he would recuse himself from should he be confirmed,” Kelly said. “I think we just need a lot more sunlight.”

Cadiz Inc. plan a vetted project that will bring jobs, water security

The Desert Sun, April 26

Earlier this month, the Interior Department reversed course on a controversial policy that blocked the development of much needed infrastructure, water and jobs in Southern California, including the Cadiz Valley Water Conservation, Recovery & Storage Project.

The Cadiz Water Project is a public-private partnership of Cadiz Inc. and Southern California public water agencies that will capture and conserve groundwater presently lost to evaporation at Cadiz Inc.'s private agricultural property in the Mojave Desert and make it available as a new water supply for 400,000 Southern Californians.

The project would add up to 1 million acre-feet of new groundwater storage capacity to Southern California's banking portfolio. The construction and implementation of this privately financed project would create and support 5,900 jobs, including 600 jobs for veterans, and generate \$6 billion in savings to Southern California ratepayers over 50 years.

Since the project was downsized and re-designed in 2009, the hydrology and geology of the Cadiz Valley aquifer system have been studied by independent experts, including former USGS officials. These studies were put out for public review by federal, state and local agencies in accordance with the stringent California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Project design was limited in size and scope to avoid impacts to the desert environment and includes a comprehensive groundwater management plan with a firm "floor" on project operations. The county of San Bernardino approved and will enforce a strict groundwater management plan.

A project conveyance pipeline would be tucked into an existing railroad right-of-way (ROW) to avoid any impacts to nearby public lands. The project's studies and review documents were approved by two public agencies, upheld in California Superior Court and sustained in the California Court of Appeal in 2016. Concerns and challenges raised by groups including the National Parks Conservation Association and Center for Biological Diversity were rejected by the courts.

In 2015, as construction was about to commence, the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) California office issued a controversial evaluation of the Cadiz Water Project. It said the proposed use of a railroad ROW for the project's pipeline would need a new, separate permit. This finding was the first of its kind from the federal government, contrary to historical precedent that encouraged the use of railroad corridors for longitudinal infrastructure – fiber optic lines, gas and sewer lines – in order to protect federal lands from environmental impacts. Earlier this year, a bipartisan group in Congress requested that the BLM withdraw the previous administration's policy and overturn the Cadiz evaluation. On March 1, the BLM responded by withdrawing the policy and is expected to address the Cadiz ROW request soon.

Without a doubt, the desert is deserving of protection and care, so projects there require thoughtful review before proceeding. But this is not a case of avoidance of review, or no review at all; with Cadiz, review and approvals have been sought and granted over several years. Indeed, and often ignored by opponents, in addition to the CEQA approvals received by this project in 2012, an earlier version of the project that would have been built on federal lands was reviewed and approved by BLM in 2002. The current calls for review of the railroad ROW by project opponents are not about better protecting the environment. Sadly, it's simply a strategy to delay the water supply, storage capacity and jobs the project would provide.

BLM freezes central Calif. leasing in deal with enviros

ENERGYWIRE, May 4

The Trump administration will pause oil and gas leasing on thousands of acres of public lands in California while it takes a closer look at the impacts of hydraulic fracturing.

The leasing freeze is part of a settlement finalized yesterday with environmental groups that sued the Interior Department and the Bureau of Land Management over development plans around Bakersfield.

The groups brought their challenge in 2015, arguing that a resource management plan and related environmental impact statement (EIS) prepared under the Obama administration failed to consider the effects of fracking on more than 1 million acres in California's central region.

The U.S. District Court for the Central District of California agreed, ruling last year that the agency had violated the National Environmental Policy Act and needed to conduct additional review (*Energywire*, Sept. 7, 2016).

Yesterday's settlement lays out plans for that review. While BLM maintains that it has not violated NEPA, the agency will not hold any lease sales while it completes a supplemental EIS that focuses on fracking. It also agreed to give the public 30 days' notice before approving any drilling permits for the area, which includes the state's central coast, Central Valley, San Joaquin Valley and southern Sierra Nevada.

"This settlement is an important victory in protecting what we hold dear in California — clean water, clean air, our diverse wildlife," Earthjustice attorney Stacey Geis said in an email. "The federal agency here was ready to just rubber-stamp fracking leases crossing huge swaths of our public lands without conducting the necessary environmental review. The law does not allow you to do that."

BLM did not respond to a request for comment in time for publication.

In last year's opinion, Judge Michael Fitzgerald, an Obama appointee, ruled that BLM had an obligation to consider the impacts of a technique expected to play a leading role in development of the area.

"The Bureau was not only aware of the projected growth in the use of fracking but also estimated that 25% of new wells in the Decision Area are expected to be fracked the future. ... Yet aside from these three isolated and passing references to fracking in the [resource management plan], the 1,073-page document makes no mention of fracking at all, let alone a meaningful discussion to inform decision-makers and the public of the attendant environmental concerns unique to fracking," the opinion said.

Environmental groups are hoping for similar results in several other cases, including a challenge to oil and gas development in New Mexico's Chaco Canyon area.

Another federal court in California ruled in 2013 that BLM had failed to consider fracking's impacts during the oil and gas leasing stage.

NATIONAL

BLM transfer provision in omnibus outrages advocates

E&E News, May 4

The omnibus spending package the Senate approved today contains a provision that would make it easier for the Bureau of Land Management to adopt out or transfer wild horses and burros, reducing the growing number of animals under the agency's care.

But the provision has angered animal rights advocates, who say it contains too many loopholes to protect thousands of wild horses and burros from being slaughtered.

At issue is a section in the omnibus package to fund the federal government through September — originally requested by the Obama administration last year — that would allow the Interior secretary to "transfer excess wild horses or burros" BLM has removed from federal rangelands "to other Federal, State, and local government agencies for use as work animals."

The provision would authorize the secretary to "make any such transfer immediately upon request" of a government agency, such as the U.S. Border Patrol. The provision includes language stating that the animals cannot be killed or sold or transferred to any entity that would slaughter them "for processing into commercial products."

But it allows transferred horses and burros to be euthanized "upon the recommendation of a licensed veterinarian, in cases of severe injury, illness, or advanced age."

It's that language that has wild horse advocates outraged.

Ginger Kathrens, executive director of the Colorado-based Cloud Foundation, said BLM "has a history of misinforming the public" about issues related to wild horses.

"Couple this with the vague 'illness' and 'advanced age' language" in the omnibus provision, "and the potential exists for the killing of thousands of horses," said Kathrens, a member of the BLM National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board.

Suzanne Roy, executive director of the American Wild Horse Campaign, agrees, saying the group is "outraged" by the provision.

Roy said the provisions against slaughtering horses for commercial purposes are "well-intended but have loopholes that open a back door big enough to drive a slaughter truck through."

She added, "There is no enforcement mechanism, no requirement for transparency, and no penalty for violating the prohibitions on slaughter and killing."

In addition, she said, language allowing animals of an "advanced age" to be euthanized is too vague and needs to be defined clearly in the provision.

"We call on Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to put in place the mechanisms for transparency, accountability, traceability and enforcement to ensure that the will of Congress and the American people to protect wild horses and burros from mass killing and slaughter is upheld," she said.

BLM support

The provision in the latest omnibus bill was requested last year as part of President Obama's fiscal 2017 budget proposal (Greenwire, Feb. 10, 2016). But until now, it was never included in any approved spending package.

BLM officials say it will go a long way toward relieving the financial burden on the agency to care for the more than 46,000 wild horses and burros it has removed from federal rangelands and placed in off-range corrals and pastures.

BLM warned last year that if it cannot adopt out or transfer to other government agencies a significant number of the wild horses and burros in holding, it will cost the agency more than \$1 billion to feed and care for the horses during their lifetime (Greenwire, May 12, 2016).

BLM last year estimated that, in addition to those in holding, there are another 67,000 animals on federal rangelands — approaching three times the 26,715 horses and burros that BLM says federal rangelands can sustain.

BLM is required by the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 to remove the excess animals in order to protect native wildlife and other rangeland resources.

Neil Kornze, BLM's former director, told a House Appropriations subcommittee last year that the agency was "overwhelmed" by the growing number of wild horses and burros on public lands across the West (E&E Daily, March 4, 2016).

Zinke has vowed to address the issue during his tenure.

Reducing the number of wild horses and burros to "appropriate management levels" is included in a BLM "priority work" list designed to guide the agency during the Trump administration.

"It's a really sensitive issue because there's a lot of America that looks at a horse as a pet, and there's a lot of Westerners that look at a horse as livestock. But we should all look at a horse as a managed asset. Because overgrazing a horse is no different than cattle out there or anything else," Zinke said in March during a meeting with members of the Public Lands Council, which includes ranchers.

"We are going to take action on the horses," he said. "I got it."

The omnibus provision is a good step, said Jason Lutterman, a spokesman for BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.

Currently, Lutterman said, if BLM wanted to transfer horses to the Border Patrol, for example, each individual agent would have to personally adopt the horse, which remains BLM property for one year until a veterinarian confirms the horse is receiving proper care.

"That's something that's not very streamlined or efficient for our purposes," he said.

Lutterman said the provision's safeguards will prevent horses from being slaughtered.

"The real point of this is to find homes and work for these animals so they are not adding to the cost we have of caring for them," he said.

But Roy said she was surprised to see it in the omnibus unveiled this week.

The Senate today passed the \$1.1 trillion bipartisan spending package; the House voted to approve it yesterday. If President Trump signs it into law, it will make the first time in more than a decade that Congress has used a spending package to amend the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, Roy said.

As such, she argued, it undermines the 1971 law.

"Our problem is that this provision uses a spending bill to amend a unanimously passed act of Congress to protect wild horse and burros as part of our national heritage," she said.

Agency suspends advisory panels even as decisions loom

GREENWIRE, May 5

The Interior Department is formally reviewing the "charter and charge" of more than 200 advisory panels that assist federal agencies managing hundreds of millions of acres of public lands at a time when the Trump administration is considering significant changes to land-use designations and management practices.

The Bureau of Land Management has told members of its 30 resource advisory councils (RACs) to postpone scheduled meetings through at least September as part of the new national review of Interior's advisory panels, both internal and external.

That includes canceling meetings of six other BLM advisory committees affiliated with specific sites within the agency's National Conservation Lands system, as well as two other high-profile panels: the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board and the North Slope Science Initiative Science Technical Advisory Panel in Alaska.

It also affects other panels, such as the National Park System Advisory Board, which advises the NPS director and Interior secretary "on matters relating to the National Park Service, the National Park System, and programs administered by the National Park Service," including the Antiquities Act, which has been targeted by GOP congressional leaders.

The timing means some land management recommendations — including a high-profile review of national monuments — will be completed without the advisory panels' input.

Heather Swift, an Interior spokeswoman, told E&E News in an email today that the review is part of an ongoing effort by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke aimed at "restoring trust in the Department's decision-making."

Swift said the review of "the charter and charge of each Board/Advisory Committee" is designed to "maximize feedback from these boards and ensure their compliance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act," the 1972 law that ensures that advice by various advisory committees is objective and accessible to the public.

"This review process necessitates the temporary postponement of advisory committee meetings," Swift said.

But Swift said the review is also designed to ensure compliance with "the President's recent executive orders."

President Trump in the last month has signed a number of executive orders, including one requiring the review of all policies that may "potentially burden" energy production activity on federal lands.

Trump last week also signed one requiring Interior to review the boundaries of dozens of national monuments designated within the last two decades and to decide whether they should be altered or eliminated (Greenwire, April 26).

That executive order is targeted at more than 30 national monuments designated since 1996 that comprise at least 100,000 acres. It will initially focus on the fate of the recently designated 1.35-million-acre Bears Ears National Monument but will ultimately include sites like the 1.9-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, both in Utah.

That executive order requires Zinke to submit a report with his recommendations on the national monuments to the president within 120 days, before the Interior review of the advisory committees and boards is completed and the postponement of the meetings lifted.

That means the Utah resource advisory council that provides recommendations to BLM on management of the 22.9 million acres of federal public lands in the state will not weigh in on the national monument issue; neither, presumably, will the members of the agency's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument advisory committee.

That concerns Greg Zimmerman, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities.

"The Trump administration and Interior Secretary Zinke talk a big game about including Western communities in decisionmaking on public lands, but this action proves it's nothing more than talk," Zimmerman said. "They are shutting out input from communities just as the administration takes unprecedented steps toward wiping national monuments from the map."

It's a particular concern for BLM, critics say.

Canceling the BLM RAC meetings "sends a clear signal that Secretary Zinke intends to make decisions behind closed doors and not through an open and transparent public process," Zimmerman said.

The agency's 30 RACs, whose members are appointed by the Interior secretary, are designed to help guide BLM administrators on a wide variety of issues involving major projects such as multistate transmission lines and energy projects.

The advisory panels typically have 10 to 15 members, who are supposed to represent a cross-section of local residents, state government agencies, industry and conservation leaders. They evaluate and submit recommendations on "land use planning, fire management, off-highway vehicle use, recreation, oil and gas exploration, noxious weed management, grazing issues, wild horse and burro herd management issues," and other topics, according to BLM.

Recommendations from the RACs, established by Interior in 1995 during the Clinton administration, are supposed to carry significant weight with BLM leaders.

But there have been some high-profile examples in the past two years where BLM ignored the recommendations of its RACs.

BLM in January approved the final two segments of the Gateway West Transmission Line Project in Idaho over the objections of an eight-member subcommittee of the BLM Boise District's RAC that concluded the route would unnecessarily affect communities, natural resource values and private landowners (Greenwire, Jan. 20).

And last year, BLM formally approved the 287-megawatt Soda Mountain Solar Project in the Southern California desert, despite the recommendation of BLM California's Desert District RAC against the project and its impacts on wildlife, groundwater quality and other natural resources (E&E News PM, April 5, 2016).