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E&E News: Zinke recommends shrinking as many as 6 sites

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President Trump could move to eliminate protections for nearly all of Utah's 1.9-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument — while also potentially making significant cuts to five other monuments — if he follows recommendations made by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, according to a leaked memorandum.

In a private report submitted to Trump in August, and first reported on by The Wall Street Journal, Zinke recommended the reduction of as many as six national and marine monuments, as well as amending the proclamations or management plans of four other sites to allow commercial fishing, protect grazing rights or use for timber harvesting.

White House spokeswoman Kelly Love declined to comment on the memorandum but told E&E News that no deadline has been set for the president to decide whether he will act on Zinke's recommendations.

"The Trump Administration does not comment on leaked documents, especially internal drafts which are still under review by the president and relevant agencies," Love said.

An Interior spokeswoman declined to comment and referred all inquiries to the White House.

Trump mandated the Interior review in an April executive order. The 120-day assessment included 27 monuments designated since 1996, all but one of which encompass more than 100,000 acres.

Although the order requested a final report by late August, Interior officials declined to release Zinke's recommendations last month, asserting that the memorandum was a draft. A copy of the memorandum provided to E&E News by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility includes the notation "Draft Deliberative — Not for Distribution" at the bottom of each page.

But Zinke acknowledged that he had recommended the reduction of a "handful" of sites. He had publicly called for unspecified cuts to the 1.35-million-acre Bears Ears National Monument in southeast Utah in mid-July, while also dismissing a half-dozen monuments from any alterations (Greenwire, Aug. 24).

The leaked memorandum shows Zinke urged Trump to reduce the acreage of four national monuments, including both Grand Staircase Escalante and Bears Ears, as well as Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Oregon and California and Gold Butte National Monument in Nevada.

The document also recommends either management or boundary changes to both the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument and the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument.

Management changes are also recommended for Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in Maine, Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument near Massachusetts, and both the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and Rio Grande del Norte national monuments in New Mexico.

The report, however, doesn't include specific cuts or maps to identify areas for reductions.

"Some of these recommendations are very mysterious," said Kristen Brengel, vice president of government affairs at the National Parks Conservation Association.

But she added that Zinke's description of Grand Staircase-Escalante, for example, would suggest that the president could attempt to eliminate the vast majority of its current acreage.

"If you took everything that's in the preamble and thought this out to yourself ... basically, that would bring the monument down to nothing, and you're not protecting any of the sacred sites or petroglyphs," Brengel said.

Zinke's description of the southwestern Utah monument notes that it's home to "an estimated several billions tons of coal and large oil deposits," a point of contention since President Clinton established the monument in 1996 in part to lock up a massive coal deposit in the area's Kaiparowits Plateau while preserving cliffs, slot canyons and sandstone arches.

Zinke's report also notes that about 47 percent of the monument land is also designated as wilderness study area (WSA), a status he has previously suggested could be an alternative to national monument designation. He also pointed to county lawsuits over the use of R.S. 2477 roads within the monument and asserted that grazing has been reduced in the area because of difficulties with maintenance of roads and other infrastructure.

Reductions to both the Bears Ears and Gold Butte monuments would likewise remove tens of thousands of acres of WSAs, as well as local water districts in the Nevada site. The Cascade-Siskiyou reductions could include measures to "reduce impacts" on more than 52,000 acres of private inholdings and to ensure timber production on nearly 17,000 acres of Oregon and California Railroad Revested Lands. Changes to the marine monuments would include permitting commercial fishing.

"They want to basically allow all of these damaging activities, whether it's mining or oil and gas development, in monuments, when that's not what the Antiquities Act was intended to do," Brengel said. "It's the worst kind of 180 you could ever do in conservation. This is absolutely anti-conservation."

Trump urged to consider 3 new designations

Zinke's memorandum also sharply criticizes the use of the Antiquities Act — which allows presidents to designate monuments on federal lands with historic, cultural or scientific interest — for protecting large-scale landscapes, including "viewsheds" and "ecosystems."

"In the case of lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), designating geographic landscape areas as objects of historic or scientific interest is especially problematic given that the determination of land uses is normally done under the robust public balancing processes pursuant to" the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Zinke wrote.

"When landscape areas are designated and reserved as part of a monument, objects and large tracts of land are overlain by a more restrictive management regime, which mandates protection of the objects identified."

He added, "This has the effect of significantly narrowing the range of uses and BLM's multiple-use mission."

Nonetheless, Zinke endorsed the creation of at least three new monuments, urging Trump to establish a public review process for those sites.

The potential monuments include the 4,000-acre Camp Nelson in Kentucky, a former Union Army supply depot, training center and hospital; the Medgar Evers Home in Mississippi, which is already a National Historic Landmark; and the 130,000-acre Badger-Two Medicine area in Montana.

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