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Sent: 2017-07-23T12:49:39-04:00
Importance: Normal
Subject: Zinke's decision on monuments coming soon
Received: 2017-07-23T12:51:43-04:00
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Zinke's decision on monuments coming soon

By Michael Coleman / Journal Washington Bureau

Sunday, July 23rd, 2017 at 12:02am

U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has just one month left before he's due to report on the likely fate of New Mexico's two newest national monuments, as well as nearly two dozen others around the nation.

New Mexicans on both sides of the debate are getting antsy.

Ultimately, the decision to downsize the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and/or the Rio Grande del Norte national monuments in New Mexico – or not – lies with President Donald Trump. But Trump is waiting on Zinke's recommendation, due no later than Aug. 24. Zinke told Congress on June 22 he would visit New Mexico to discuss the monuments with concerned parties “in two weeks.” Late Thursday, an Interior Department spokeswoman said the agency, responsible for millions of acres of federal lands, still wasn't ready to announce Zinke's visit.

So far in this process, the Interior secretary has not been entirely predictable. In mid-June, he recommended scaling back the size of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. But in the same week he also removed Craters of the Moon National Monument in Idaho and Hanford Reach National Monument in Washington from his list of monuments under review.

On Friday, the former Republican congressman from Montana announced he also would recommend no changes for the Canyons of the Ancients monument, which covers 178,000 acres in southwestern Colorado. In doing so, Zinke revealed part of what is driving his decisions.

“Canyons of the Ancients is gorgeous land, but its monument status as the most high-density Native American archaeological sites in the nation is clear,” he said in a statement. “The history at this site spans thousands of years, and the federal protection of these objects and history will help us preserve this site for a thousand more years.”

The key words are very likely “high-density.” Zinke and Trump have likened many of the monuments designated during President Barack Obama's tenure as sprawling “land grabs” they hope to right-size. A relatively small, high-density collection of Native American artifacts and objects might seem less conspicuous to Zinke than a monument like, say, Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, which isn't contiguous and drapes across more than a half-million acres. That's not to say Zinke will suggest reducing the southern New Mexico monument, but size does matter in this ongoing review.

Politics also matters. A likely driver of Zinke's decision to suggest shrinking Bears Ears National Monument in Utah was the fact the state's entire congressional delegation and governor – all Republicans – strongly support the move. The political picture in New Mexico is more complicated. We have four Democrats and one Republican in the state delegation, and the

Republican – Rep. Steve Pearce – represents the district where Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks is located.

Pearce has suggested shrinking the monument by as much as 88 percent. Meanwhile, all four of the Democrats in the state delegation oppose shrinking either of the Obama-designated national monuments in question in New Mexico. Sen. Tom Udall, who hosted a public rally in support of preserving the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument near Taos on Friday, told me earlier this month he’s worried Pearce “has the ear” of the White House on the southern N.M. monument.

That concern is justified. Pearce’s longtime chief-of-staff, Todd Willens, just took over as the deputy assistant secretary at Interior this month, and you can bet Zinke is seeking his input on the New Mexico monuments. Pearce himself was one of Trump’s biggest backers in the 2016 campaign, and Trump remembers stuff like that.

No matter what Zinke decides, I do hope he listens to a broad cross-section of New Mexicans when he convenes meetings on the fate of the state’s monuments. During a conference call Thursday with public officials and business and community members – a state senator, state representative, two county commissioners, four mayors, a chamber of commerce president and a representative of a sportsmen’s group – who support keeping the two monuments as-is, I learned none had been notified or invited to any meetings with Zinke. Yet two supporters of shrinking the monuments recently told me they have been told to be ready to meet with him.

If Zinke hopes to reflect the wishes of New Mexicans when it comes to their monuments, he needs to listen to those on all sides of the debate.

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