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INTERIOR

Zinke's meeting with Senate Dems could ease vacancy woes

Michael Doyle, E&E News reporter

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has agreed to meet with Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) about pending department nominees. Lance Cheung/USDA

This story was updated at 1:45 p.m.

Some of the Interior Department's stalled nominations could start moving, perhaps soon, with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's new offer to confer with disgruntled Senate Democrats.

Moving to resolve a standoff that has kept his Interior team shorthanded and prompted mutual finger-pointing, Zinke advised Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) yesterday that he is "happy to meet .. to discuss any issue within the Department of the Interior."

Durbin, the Senate's assistant minority leader, had advised the department earlier this week that pending Interior nominations would remain on hold until the Interior secretary met with senators to discuss the Trump administration's controversial review of national monuments (*E&E Daily*, Nov. 9).

"These nominees have nothing to do with this monument review, yet they have been forced to sit on the sidelines due to you and your colleagues' desire for a meeting," Zinke wrote yesterday, adding that "as a former Navy SEAL, this is not the type of hostage situation I am accustomed to."

In the world of Capitol Hill maneuvering, Zinke's offer of a sit-down could, nonetheless, be scored as a concession on his part. He had not previously responded to an Oct. 23 request for a meeting with Democrats, Durbin said.

Durbin's spokesperson, Ben Marter, said this afternoon: "That was probably harder than it needed to be, but the Secretary has now reached out to schedule a meeting and Senator Durbin is looking forward to it."

@SecretaryZinke/Twitter

Zinke already learned an earlier lesson about Senate clout when a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee vote on some nominees was abruptly canceled amid reports that he had tried to pressure the chairwoman, Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), on an unrelated health care vote.

Zinke and Murkowski subsequently shared a beer, publicly toasting another, and the

vote was rescheduled roughly a week later, with no apparent hard feelings ([Greenwire](#), July 27).

But then other impediments arose to the Interior nominees, for reasons that were not always apparent until Durbin's letter to Interior this week. In it, Durbin reminded officials of the previously unresponded-to Oct. 23 letter signed by four Senate Democrats.

"We request that you meet with us in Senator Durbin's office to explain any recommendations you have to alter existing national monuments and provide maps, documentation, and justification for the changes you are pursuing and what authority you will use to enact the changes," Durbin and the other Democrats had written in October.

Until Zinke cooperated, the Democrats warned, they would "reserve the right to object to nominees for the Department of the Interior being confirmed." While Democrats are in the minority, they can slow things down with holds and other procedural tools.

They also don't like to be ignored, as Durbin broadly hinted this week with his stated disappointment that Zinke "could not take the time to respond" to the senators' Oct. 23 letter.

Zinke's national monument report to the White House remains officially under wraps, though a draft was leaked in September, and President Trump's decisions "have not been finalized," Zinke said ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 18).

Pointedly noting that "none of the monuments under review" are in Durbin's home state of Illinois, Zinke in his letter yesterday itemized "all of the meetings and calls" he did have with the three Western Democrats who co-signed the Oct. 23 letter, as well as with others.

Zinke recounted an Aug. 1 meeting with Oregon's Democratic senators, Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, in Merkley's D.C. office to discuss the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, as well as two phone calls with Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) to discuss the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument.

Zinke did not specify how long these earlier calls and meetings lasted.

In addition to serving as the Senate's No. 2 Democrat, Durbin represents the many Illinois residents who joined a large and well-organized public outcry over potential Trump administration plans to shrink certain monuments.

"I am very disappointed and concerned that this [proposal] threatens our national monuments, especially Bears Ears in southeastern Utah," Plainfield, Ill., resident Mary Hanley affirmed in a form letter signed by dozens of other Illinois residents.

The potential Senate thawing comes as Brenda Burman has been waiting more than 132 days since Trump announced her nomination as commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. Susan Combs has been waiting more than 120 days since her nomination as assistant Interior secretary for policy, management and budget.

Combs and Burman were both approved by the ENR Committee on Aug. 3.

Joseph Balash has been waiting more than 106 days since his nomination as assistant secretary for land and minerals management, and Ryan Nelson has been

waiting more than 98 days since his nomination as solicitor.

None of the four nominees appear to face significant opposition.

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MODIFYING THE GRAND STAIRCASE ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
A PROCLAMATION

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