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Bangor Daily News: Interior Secretary Zinke recommends keeping Maine's national monument

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is recommending that President Donald Trump keep Maine's year-old Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument.

"Nothing dramatic" would change with the monument, according to a source briefed on the plan.

Zinke is trying to "thread the needle" and craft recommendations that satisfy all parties involved in the controversial monument, the source said.

Now the question becomes, how will the unpredictable Trump respond to the report?

The news ended months of speculation over the possible fate of one of Maine's most contentious parcels of land, after Trump in April ordered a review of 27 national monuments created by previous presidents.

Representing the first significant federal presence in Maine's North Woods, the monument, to some, has stood as a symbol of the decades-old fight between environmentalists and forest-products-industry stalwarts in a region hard hit by the loss of its storied paper manufacturing industry.

Burt's Bees entrepreneur Roxanne Quimby led the push to put the land under federal control in 2011, roughly a decade after she began buying parcels east of Baxter State Park.

Quimby had hoped to donate the land for a national park that year, but that notion was a nonstarter: Maine's congressional representatives never submitted a bill to start the legislative process. Her son, Lucas St. Clair, assumed command of the faltering park campaign in 2012. In April 2015, a lobbyist he hired began meeting with federal officials on a monument proposal.

To some, Quimby was as an environmentalist's hero who saw beyond Maine's past and petty local concerns. To others, her effort was little more than a desire for posterity at the expense of area residents.

Overwhelming opposition was evident in every referendum on the park or monument held by towns near Quimby's land. Park supporters countered that loud applause and hand counts at a May 2016 forum featuring then-National Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis showed that Maine supported the monument. The supporters ignored a meeting earlier that same day in which Katahdin-region leaders told Jarvis of their opposition in often bitter tones. Still, President

Obama created the monument with a nine-page executive executive order on Aug. 24, 2016.

Critics say that Obama ignored local stakeholders and that the monument has no great environmental or cultural value. Proponents say that stakeholders support the monument and that its unique features would help the struggling Katahdin-region economy.

But within a few months of Obama's order, the fervor began dying down. Katahdin-region leaders starting saying that they would accept the monument — or were at least prepared to live with it. Monument visitors began to slowly trickle into the region and some businesses began expanding.

Then came Trump's executive order.

His review process began murkily, with Gov. Paul LePage's influence helping shoehorn Katahdin Woods and Waters into Trump's proclamation. The governor was in Washington, D.C., when Trump signed on April 26 of this year his own proclamation ordering a review of all monuments created since 1996.

Zinke initially appeared to exclude Katahdin Woods and Waters when he said that the review would include monuments that are 100,000 acres or larger. Maine's monument was added to the list on May 5. Attorneys general going back to the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt have said that presidents are not legally empowered to rescind executive orders creating monuments, although two presidents have shrunk monuments. Congress can eliminate them through legislation.

The Trump administration indicated that reversals might be possible under a clause in the Antiquities Act of 1906 that confines monuments to "the smallest area compatible with proper care and management of the objects to be protected."

His order was enough to spur 19 Katahdin-region leaders, including some former critics of the monument, to sign a letter to Secretary Zinke supporting Katahdin Woods and Waters in May.

During his visit to Maine in mid-June, Zinke hinted both that the monument could be upgraded through legislation into a national park and that he supported keeping it at 87,562 acres and retaining federal control of it.

This was a blow to Republican monument foes LePage and U.S. Rep. Bruce Poliquin, who asked Trump to turn control of the land over to the state.

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