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Western officials urge Biden to designate more monuments

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The tree-lined Escalante River runs by sandstone cliffs in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument outside Boulder, Utah. George Frey/Getty Images

GREENWIRE | A coalition of more than 115 local government leaders from 11 Western states is asking President Biden to take executive action and establish more national monuments due to climate change and a deeply divided Congress that isn't going to do so on its own.

The local leaders, in a [letter](#) sent today to Biden and Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, thanked Biden for restoring the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah and reinstating commercial fishing restrictions in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument — all of which had been altered by former President Trump.

But the government leaders state in the letter, organized by the Mountain Pact, which works with local elected officials in the West on climate and public lands issues, that more lands must be preserved, noting the challenges of climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led directly to record visitation to national parks and monuments in the past two years.

They urged Biden to work with Haaland to identify potential federal lands worthy of national monument designation, and for Biden to use the Antiquities Act of 1906 to designate these lands and waters as monuments. Such moves would help advance the ongoing "America the Beautiful" initiative to conserve 30 percent of the nation's lands and waters by 2030, they write.

"With an evenly split Congress with a lot on its plate that is unlikely to move on its own to protect public lands, we are counting on the administration to move swiftly to use its authority under the Antiquities Act to protect more natural, cultural, and historic sites, as well as waters and lands of great scientific value," the Mountain Pact letter says.

"The Antiquities Act conserves vital places so our stories can be told and experiences can be shared for generations to come," the letter adds. "Please take action to protect more of our great public lands as national monuments through the use of the Antiquities Act to truly accomplish the America the Beautiful Initiative."

Among the 115 Western government officials signing the letter were Clark County, Nev., Commissioner Justin Jones; Grand County, Utah, Commissioner Sarah Stock; and Santa Fe, N.M., Mayor Alan Webber.

The support for the Biden administration's initiative, commonly referred to as the "30x30" plan, is at odds with Western Republican leaders in Congress.

About three dozen GOP lawmakers, from both chambers of Congress, unveiled in October their own plan, titled "Western Conservation Principles: An Alternative Proposal to Conserve and Restore America's Landscapes." It mostly follows common Republican calls for reforms to bedrock environmental laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act ([E&E Daily](#), Oct. 6).

"The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses agree that many challenges plague our public lands," the plan document states. "If we are to restore healthy and resilient landscapes, we must maximize the conservation benefits provided by activities like grazing, hunting, logging, and mineral development. We also must leverage the expertise of our local partners including through the use of existing shared stewardship authorities and seek policies that further enhance these tools. We need an all-hands-on-deck."

But the local Western government leaders say more public lands conservation is needed in light of the pandemic, which forced lockdowns and prompted record numbers of visitors to federal lands in their home states.

"Adding more protected lands through parks and public land, as well as funding to manage these lands would improve access and lessen overcrowding," they write in the letter to Biden and Haaland.

They also argue that climate change, which has led to more frequent "drought, wildfires, flooding, dust on snow events, and record-setting temperatures" is all the more reason to conserve lands and waters.

"We urge you to use your authority under the Antiquities Act to designate new national monuments, which would protect more lands from oil and gas drilling and could help reduce climate impacts that are greatly harming our communities," they write.