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Bureau of Land Management to keep large Colorado office as HQ moves back to DC

Trump administration ordered the agency that manages federal land to Colorado in 2019



U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland visits the Grand Junction Air Center Complex in summer 2021 to discuss her agency's response to wildfires and the Bureau of Land Management headquarters.

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PUBLISHED: September 17, 2021 at 1:57 p.m. | UPDATED: September 17, 2021 at 5:18 p.m.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management's headquarters will no longer be run from a headquarters in Grand Junction, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced Friday.

Instead, the agency headquarters will return to Washington, D.C., where it had been before a 2019 decision by former President Donald Trump, though BLM said it will maintain and expand its presence in western Colorado.

"It is imperative that the bureau have the appropriate structure and resources to serve the American public," Haaland said in a news release. "There's no doubt that the BLM should have a leadership presence in Washington, D.C. — like all the other land management agencies — to ensure that it has access to the policy-, budget-, and decision-making levers to best carry out its mission.

"In addition, the BLM's robust presence in Colorado and across the West will continue to grow."

Colorado politicians and Western Slope leaders who had lobbied to keep the headquarters here expressed mild disappointment on Friday, but also said they were pleased BLM will retain a presence in a state where about 36% is federally managed land.

The Interior Department said the move was to "improve the function of the bureau, help provide clarity for the BLM's more than 7,000 employees across the country, maintain and increase access for stakeholders, and enable the bureau to better serve the American public and fulfill its mission as the steward of nearly one-fifth of the nation's public lands."

The BLM director — Biden's nominee for the job, Tracy Stone-Manning, has not yet been confirmed — and other leadership positions will be set in D.C. Other "senior personnel" will be based in Grand Junction, the Interior Department's release said, "as part of the more than 95 percent of BLM employees that are already located outside of Washington, D.C."

Trump's decision to shift BLM headquarters to Colorado in 2019, which came at the same time as the decision to move [two U.S. Department of Agriculture research agencies](#) to Kansas City, Missouri, was welcomed by many on the Western Slope and then-GOP U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner.

But more than 87% of the affected employees either resigned or retired instead of moving to Colorado, [The Washington Post reported](#). And it didn't lead to the promised 27 to 40 jobs; only three BLM employees are currently based at the agency's leased offices in Grand Junction, said Christian Reece, the executive director of [Club 20](#), an organization that advocates for western Colorado interests.

Grand Junction Area Chamber of Commerce president Diane Schwenke said the BLM move never fully met expectations.

“It’s your typical cycle of a courtship. High excitement at the beginning. Then we go into the lull period. Then there’s the breakup,” Schwenke said. “There’s some sadness. But we are looking to the next relationship.”

Haaland, [who visited the Grand Junction headquarters in July](#), said Friday that “the past several years have been incredibly disruptive to the organization, to our public servants, and to their families. As we move forward, my priority is to revitalize and rebuild the BLM so that it can meet the pressing challenges of our time, and to look out for our employees’ well-being.”

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis said having “more senior BLM officials and decision-makers moving to the Grand Junction office” is beneficial, adding in a statement that, “the initial presence was far too small and now I’m finally hopeful that the office will grow.”

U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, a Republican who represents western Colorado, leveled accusations at Democratic Sens. John Hickenlooper and Michael Bennet, saying they “folded and failed to stand up for Colorado” and added that she hopes they make sure “new promises (President Joe Biden) made them materialize.”

But most of Colorado’s congressional delegation, including Hickenlooper, Democratic U.S. Rep. [Joe Neguse](#) and Boebert, had [urged Haaland](#) to keep the bureau’s headquarters in Grand Junction.

Western Slope leaders in Grand Junction also had hoped to retain the national head office.

“We spent a lot of time advocating to have that headquarters here in Grand Junction,” said Christian Reece, director of the Club 20 group that advocates for western Colorado, who met with Haaland [during her visit](#). “We feel that having the highest-level decision-makers close to the people who actually use these lands is still critical. That hasn’t changed.”

The decision “doesn’t come as a surprise,” Reece said, and Club 20 members are “are excited to keep a western headquarters in Grand Junction. The work begins now to make sure this western headquarters is fully staffed with senior leadership and is fully functional.”

The Mountain Pact advocacy group, which works with local elected officials on climate and public lands matters, called Haaland’s decision a smart compromise.

“We saw so many skilled and senior leaders leave the BLM during the Trump administration because of the misguided and forced move to Grand Junction,”

Director Anna Peterson said. “Moving the headquarters back to D.C. will allow staff to more effectively collaborate and manage our nation’s public lands with proper oversight.”

The bureau manages more than 245 million acres across the U.S., the majority of which is in the American West. The agency also manages livestock grazing and determines whether to authorize electricity transmission and pipeline projects across those lands.

In 2019, the Washington Post reported it would cost at least \$4 million to move the BLM headquarters to Colorado, but on Friday, Boebert put that figure as high as \$18 million, adding that “any move back would cost at least that and more.”

She also said the “rushed decision isn’t about helping western communities,” but instead a “partisan attack on rural communities.” However, she acknowledged that “this could still ultimately be a win for Grand Junction and the West as a western headquarters will remain in Grand Junction, more jobs will move to Grand Junction, and all the jobs that moved out West won’t be moved back to D.C.”

Hickenlooper, who won Gardner’s seat, said the Grand Junction headquarters must “be a strong, permanent presence that engages the community and adds a Western perspective and value to the BLM’s mission.”

“A Western BLM Headquarters in Colorado will help ensure we have a fully functioning agency that understands the West,” Hickenlooper said. “We’ll keep working to secure jobs in Grand Junction, including senior leadership positions.”

Bennet said he was disappointed to see the national headquarters returning to Washington, but that “establishing and growing a permanent BLM Western Headquarters in Grand Junction should be a very positive development.”

Meanwhile, Wyoming GOP U.S. Sen. John Barrasso said “the Biden administration’s answer for everything is to double the size of government.” Barrasso, the ranking member of the Senate’s Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, believes the BLM headquarters belongs in the West, “closer to the resources it manages and the people it serves.”