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Despite Signing The Great American Outdoors Act, Enforcement Has Been Sporadic

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President Trump signed a big public lands conservation bill this summer. But so far the White House's implementation of the new law has been scattershot and controversial.

LULU GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST:

America is divided over many things, but protecting public lands and national parks enjoys broad public support. This summer, President Trump signed a bipartisan bill to do just that. But three months later, the Trump administration's implementation of the new law is being criticized. NPR's Kirk Siegler has more.

KIRK SIEGLER, BYLINE: On California's remote eastern Sierra, Jennifer Kreitz is a supervisor in Mono County, which is more than 90% federal public land. They've seen a huge increase in visitors and environmental pressures lately, especially during the pandemic. But Kreitz has lobbied for more federal funds to help manage and buy new public land in her backyard for years.

JENNIFER KREITZ: These funds are seen as a way to help finally bolster the experience for the visitor and protect the land.

SIEGLER: When President Trump signed the Great American Outdoors Act, Kreitz celebrated. The law takes billions in oil and gas royalties and puts them towards conservation projects, like one proposed in Mono that will make it easier for the public to access popular recreation lands. There's also some \$9 billion going toward a staggering backlog of fixes at national parks. Mono County abuts Yosemite, which is in need of some 500 million alone.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: There hasn't been anything like this since Teddy Roosevelt, I suspect.

SIEGLER: At the bill signing, President Trump hailed the legislation that he said would preserve America's natural wonders.

(APPLAUSE)

SIEGLER: Democrats, like Senator Martin Heinrich of New Mexico, were mostly excluded from that ceremony in August. An original co-sponsor of the bill, Heinrich says Trump's sudden interest in conservation looked like pure politics.

MARTIN HEINRICH: They had a big press conference at the White House. They made sure that their imperiled senators were part of that press conference.

SIEGLER: The law makes permanent the popular Land and Water Conservation Fund, which previous Trump budgets had all but zeroed out, Heinrich says.

HEINRICH: The reality is this administration was never wholeheartedly behind this legislation. They saw this as an opportunity in an important election year.

SIEGLER: One of the act's lead sponsors, Republican Cory Gardner of Colorado, lost his reelection bid. And around Election Day, the administration missed a key congressional deadline to submit its list of projects to get funded. And when the list did come out, it was significantly pared down. Jennifer Kreitz was surprised to learn that Mono County's project had been removed.

KREITZ: I think it sends a poor impression right off the start that already we're going to cut funding from your region, from your public lands. I think it leaves a bad taste if that's how we're going to start here.

SIEGLER: Conservationists are also fuming over a secretarial order tacked onto the act last month that gives governors veto power over any federal public lands acquisition. The Trump administration says this is about being better neighbors, not stymying new federal public land acquisitions.

MARGARET EVERSON: We really want to make sure that the investments that we're making on the federal side complement what the states are doing.

SIEGLER: Margaret Everson is the administration's point person for implementing the act. She's also currently the acting park service director, the fourth temporary leader of the agency under Trump.

EVERSON: It has been a focus of this administration to make sure that we are really careful about investing every single dollar of this act so when we look back, we can be really proud of those investments.

SIEGLER: But this is the end of the Trump administration, and it's not clear whether all this controversy for now is moot. Tracy Stone-Manning is with the National Wildlife Federation.

TRACY STONE-MANNING: It just adds to the list of the things that the new administration is going to have to fix.

KREITZ: Conservationists are already lobbying President-elect Biden to undo much of what's already been implemented to the landmark conservation law.

Kirk Siegler, NPR News, Boise.

(SOUNDBITE OF SILICON SOUND'S "TWINKLEZ")

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