

# PUBLIC LANDS CONSERVATION IN THE TRUMP ERA: HOW THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S POLICIES ARE HURTING WESTERN MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES



**The Mountain Pact**

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Founded in 2014, [The Mountain Pact](#) is an effort to educate, mobilize, and empower mountain towns with outdoor recreation-based economies in the American West around federal policy. We work with local elected officials in over 50 mountain communities from all 11 western states to build resilience in the face of environmental stresses and their economic impacts through a shared voice on policies related to climate, public lands, and outdoor recreation.




## INTRODUCTION

President Trump claimed in a [July 8, 2019 speech](#)<sup>1</sup> that his administration is “being good stewards of our public land,” reducing carbon emissions, and promoting the “cleanest air” and “crystal clean” water.

These claims are simply false. Instead, President Trump has made rolling back critical environmental protections a focus of his presidency. By asserting “energy dominance” on America’s public lands, appointing former extractive industry and anti-public lands leaders to head key environmental agencies, and refusing to adequately fund our public lands, this administration has made it clear that oil, gas, coal, and mining take precedence over outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, clean air, and clean water.

As of September 2019, there are 84 [environmental rollbacks](#)<sup>2</sup> being carried out under President Trump which have significant impacts on Western mountain communities who depend on the national public lands out their backdoor. Public lands support the \$887 billion outdoor recreation industry as well as the economies and culture of mountain communities in the West. This report takes a look at how Western mountain communities have been impacted by the Trump administration’s harmful policies.

First, we present a general overview of key moments that have harmed public lands across the West. This is followed by a look at specific decisions that have impacted each of the 11 Western states.



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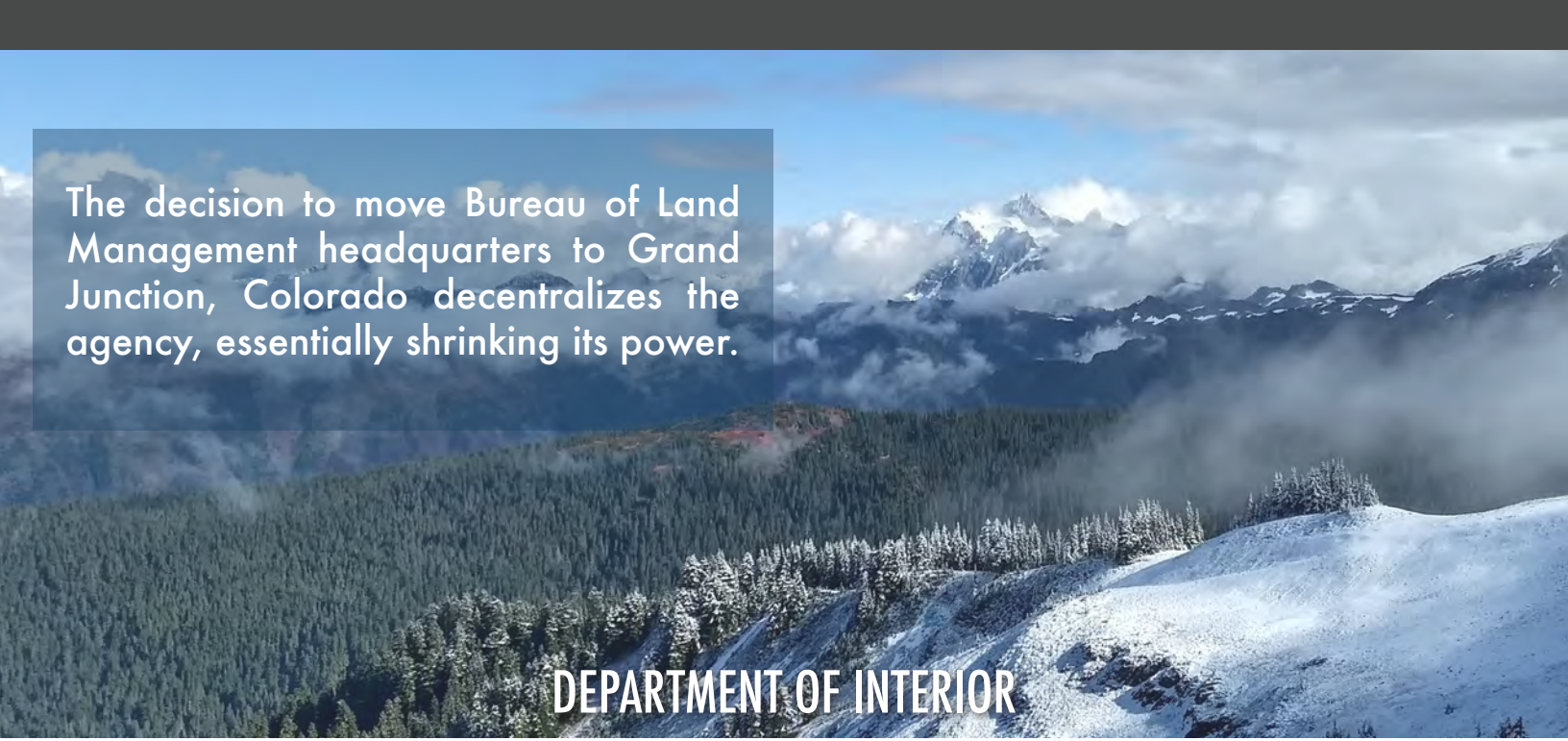
## “ENERGY DOMINANCE” ON WESTERN PUBLIC LANDS

Following his election, President Trump immediately began destroying the environmental progress that had been made by the Obama administration. Here are just some key moments from the past two and a half years that have significantly harmed public lands through a focus on “energy dominance:”

- In January 2018, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) deemed public involvement in oil and gas lease sales an “unnecessary impediment,” reduced protest periods from 30 days to 10 days, and made public comment the discretion of BLM personnel (Instruction Memorandum (IM) [2018-034](#)<sup>4</sup>).

Essentially, this created an oil and gas leasing process where parcels could be placed up for auction with very limited notice or input from other users of public lands. In effect, speeding up the process by shutting the public out and limiting environmental review.

- In March of 2017, President Trump coined the term “[energy dominance](#)<sup>3</sup>.” This term has been used to justify many Department of Interior (DOI) decisions that have overwhelmingly benefited the oil, gas, coal, and mining industries at the expense of our public lands.
- In April 2017, President Trump ordered then-Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to conduct a review of all national monuments over 100,000 acres that had been created since 1996. These national monuments had all been protected using the 1906 Antiquities Act, a bedrock public land conservation law signed by Teddy Roosevelt used equally by Republicans and Democrats to protect iconic places from the Grand Canyon to the Statue of Liberty. Many monuments identified for review were those with fossil fuel or mineral extraction potential.
- From late December 2018 through much of January 2019, the U.S. government shut down for 35 days, the longest period in history, over a budget disagreement. During this shutdown, DOI chose to leave public lands, including national parks, open to the public without adequate staffing, maintenance, or facilities. This resulted in widespread and largely irreversible damage to many national parks. Yet at the same time, DOI chose to [continue issuing oil and gas leasing permits](#)<sup>5</sup> during the shutdown, deeming employees who could approve permits “essential.”



The decision to move Bureau of Land Management headquarters to Grand Junction, Colorado decentralizes the agency, essentially shrinking its power.

## DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR

President Trump has repeatedly appointed agency heads that seem set on destroying the agencies that they are tasked with overseeing. Both the originally appointed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and DOI agency heads faced numerous ethics scandals and subsequently resigned under pressure. DOI leadership has been a revolving door with former industry executives and anti-public lands crusaders making major public lands decisions in support of their former clients and extreme ideologies.

Former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke's successor, Secretary David Bernhardt, has been scrutinized regarding [several conflicts of interest](#)<sup>6</sup>. David Bernhardt worked behind the scenes as Deputy Secretary of Interior until his April 2019 confirmation as Secretary. Even as Deputy Secretary, Bernhardt faced questions regarding conflicts of interest. The former oil lobbyist has [made and facilitated numerous decisions](#)<sup>7</sup> that have directly benefited his former clients.

One way that Secretary Bernhardt has worked to undermine DOI is his attempt to restructure the BLM. Secretary Bernhardt announced that BLM headquarters, and 300 higher level BLM employees, would be [moving West](#)<sup>8</sup>.

The new headquarters are planned for Grand Junction, Colorado with several other satellite offices scattered across the West. This move decentralizes the agency, essentially shrinking its power. This news came out in conjunction with the appointment of an outspoken and self-proclaimed "Sagebrush Rebel" to [acting head of BLM](#)<sup>9</sup>. For decades, William Perry Pendley has advocated for the transfer and sale of federal lands to the states and private interests. This appointment leaves little question as to the Trump administration's and Secretary Bernhardt's intentions for our public lands.

Further, Secretary Bernhardt has been [working to weaken](#)<sup>10</sup> the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since his lobbying days when he worked for a California water district to reduce protections for an endangered fish, the Delta Smelt. New [revisions](#)<sup>11</sup> to the ESA weaken habitat protections and impose an economic analysis when considering listing a species. These revisions undermine the intent of the law and put many species and habitat conservation programs at risk. Secretary Bernhardt is putting the interests of his former clients above imperiled wildlife at a time when a [U.N. report warns](#)<sup>12</sup> that as many as 1 million species are at risk of extinction globally.




# THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND AND PRESIDENT TRUMP'S 2020 BUDGET

Since letting it expire in September 2018, Congress has been working to permanently reauthorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). In March 2019, the historic [John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act](#)<sup>13</sup> was signed into law. This act includes extensive support for public lands including permanent reauthorization of the LWCF. However, even as Congress works to pass a bill that will fully fund the LWCF, President Trump announced a budget proposal that would provide essentially zero dollars for the fund. The LWCF is widely considered America's most successful conservation program, having provided funding for projects in every state and nearly every county in the United States.

The administration's [proposed Fiscal Year \(FY\) 2020 budget](#)<sup>14</sup> would reduce funding for DOI by 14%, the EPA by 31%, and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) by 15%, deeply slashing all public lands and environment funding.

Although many of the budget requests are unlikely to become reality, the proposal makes it clear that the Trump administration continues to prioritize corporate interests and extractive industries at the expense of all other uses of public lands. For example, the administration has proposed a \$60 million increase in fossil fuel development and research while deeply cutting renewable energy research and development (by 70%).



## IMPACTS TO MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES

What follows are just **some** of the anti-environmental and anti-public lands moves taken by the Trump administration. The list of disastrous impacts is long. Steps taken by the EPA to revoke the Clean Power Plan, weaken fuel efficiency standards, and revise methane emission regulations, as well as steps taken by the Forest Service to limit public input and science in National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews, have also greatly impacted the United States and mountain communities. Yet, due to such large scale environmental and conservation rollbacks carried out by the Trump administration which impact Western mountain communities and the public lands they rely on, this report highlights negative Department of Interior (DOI) and budget actions.

Most of the national issues discussed in this report have impacts that cross state lines and impact all communities. The impacts are broad and felt by many and cannot be confined to narrow geographical regions. All decisions made regarding public lands management impact mountain communities due to their proximity and dependence on public lands for recreation, tourism, and healthy air and water. To highlight specific community impacts, this report takes many of these broad decisions made under the Trump administration's "energy dominance" agenda and looks at how they have played out in each of the 11 Western states through three categories: Oil, Gas, and Coal; Land Management and Extraction; and Wildlife and Conservation. These specific impacts show the extent of the harm done.

**CONCLUSION** The Trump administration’s “energy dominance” agenda and lack of commitment to science have been detrimental for public lands and Western communities. This, coupled with the administration’s unwillingness to fund conservation programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), has led to a large scale reduction in public lands protections.

The agencies tasked with managing public lands for multiple uses are instead managing public lands solely for extractive purposes. This degrades the environmental health of large swaths of lands, closes off areas that could otherwise be used for recreation or sightseeing, further contributes to greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change, and is often found to be illegal by the courts.

A [report<sup>74</sup>](#) released by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in November 2018 found that greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel extraction on public lands accounts for one-quarter of all United States greenhouse gas emissions, a fact the Trump administration disregards and even tried to hide through the untimely release of the report. Increased fossil fuel development increases the impacts of climate change such as drought, unpredictable snowfall and snowmelt, and increases in catastrophic wildfires.

From expanding and streamlining oil and gas leasing to reducing the size of national monuments in favor of extractive industries, the Trump administration’s priorities are clear. The President and his top officials at the Department of Interior (DOI) have time and time again proven that they are interested in furthering oil, gas, and mining industries above all else on public lands.

Mountain communities are inextricably linked to the public lands that surround them, and thus are damaged economically and culturally with the sole prioritization of extractive industries. [Studies<sup>75</sup>](#) have shown the benefits of proximity to public lands, finding that counties in the West with more federal lands perform better in four key economic factors. The rural, non-metro counties with the highest percentage of federal public lands have experienced faster growth in population, employment, personal income, and per capita income – highlighting the importance of federal public lands in the West. Yet the Trump administration has charged forward with the destruction and exploitation of our public lands and these same rural counties and communities are continually put at risk.

Further, outdoor recreation supports an [\\$887 billion industry<sup>76</sup>](#) and provides 7.6 million American jobs and is dependent on healthy and well-managed public lands, which means not leasing every acre to extractive industries for bargain basement prices.

“Energy dominance” is not an appropriate way to manage public lands. We have seen this approach disregard recreation and conservation since President Trump took office. The Trump administration has consistently made decisions to expand oil, gas, and coal extraction on public lands while not considering the impacts to nearby communities.

This report highlights just some of the ways the ways the Trump administration’s “energy dominance” agenda and leadership have impacted Western states and Western mountain communities. These issues have a broad reach and are just a snapshot of detrimental environmental, climate change, and conservation policies this administration has made. Public land management decisions need to consider and include possible health, cultural, economic, and ecological impacts to nearby communities due to climate change and increased public land destruction. It is time we put funding behind conservation programs such as the LWCF and management agencies to ensure our public lands can be enjoyed by all; future generations and the health of America’s public lands legacy depend on it.