



# The Mountain Pact

## December Conservation Update

We hope you are enjoying the holiday season! In this month's December Conservation Update we cover how federal policies and agencies are impacting western mountain communities related to public lands, climate change, and outdoor recreation. You will find updates on: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)'s oil and gas leasing policies; drilling in the arctic; the border wall's impacts on national park rangers and local water resources; the impacts of climate change on endangered species; Interior Secretary Bernhardt's ethics; and how the BLM is ignoring a judge's order to abide by the 2015 sage-grouse management plan; with a special highlight on the BLM's move west.



### December Spotlight

In July, Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt announced that BLM headquarters would be relocating to Grand Junction, Colorado and [all but 61 BLM employees would be relocated](#) there, or to other offices across the western states. The move has been [questioned by lawmakers](#) and has not received funding from Congress. Still, on November 12, more than 300 BLM employees in Washington, D.C. [received their relocation notices](#). The notices stated that employees had 30 days to decide whether they would relocate, or leave the BLM. Those that choose to leave the BLM have been given until January 31, 2020 to go.

Many lawmakers, conservationists, and former BLM employees have [criticized the move](#) saying that it will lead to a loss of institutional knowledge and "brain drain" at the agency. Veteran land manager Steve Ellis pointed out that the [first step to eliminating an agency](#) is to, "make them irrelevant at the Nation's capital." He warned that by removing career BLM employees from Washington, the BLM was weakening its influence on the nation's capital. Critics cite worries over this loss of power as several key groups will be [fractured by the move](#) like the teams responsible for the review of Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance.



## Other Conservation Related News

- **Nearly one million acres of land that had been slated for oil and gas lease sales have been suspended following a string of lawsuits arguing that the BLM failed to adequately consider the climate change impacts of oil and gas developments.** The most recent suspension of 130 oil and gas leases in Utah followed various rulings that to comply with NEPA, the BLM must consider the climate change impacts of the proposed leases.
- In direct contrast to these court rulings, **acting BLM Chief William Perry Pendley recently told staff in an agency-wide e-mail that he was grateful for speedier environmental reviews.** BLM has reduced the number of pages and the time it takes to produce a full EIS, which has sped up the rate of oil and gas projects while not allowing adequate time to consider all conservation or climate change impacts.
- The Trump administration announced plans to expand drilling on 18.3 acres of the 23.4 acre National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A). **West of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the BLM managed land has received relatively little attention despite its high concentration of critical habitat for migrating birds and caribou.** Half of the reserve had been placed "off-limits" by the Obama administration. The publication of the EIS in the federal register kicked off a 60-day public comment period ending on January 21. Information on how to submit a comment can be found here.
- At a time when national park staffing is at record lows, **President Trump has announced that rangers from national parks across the United States will be sent to parks along the U.S. - Mexico border to help border agents arrest migrants who are illegally crossing the border.** This tactic was used fifteen years ago during the United States' "War on Drugs," and is criticized by many due to the lack of relevant training for park rangers being sent to the border. This lack of specific training can lead to dangerous conditions for park rangers.
- Another concern is the amount of water being consumed in the construction of the border wall. At one wildlife refuge in Cochise County, Arizona, **Fish and Wildlife Service managers are worried that water levels will drop up to 13 feet in artesian wells which would devastate the plant and animal species that rely on the rare oasis in the desert.**
- In mid-November, scientists published a study in *Nature Climate Change* that found that **99.8 percent of the 459 species on the Endangered Species List possess one or more traits that will make it challenging for them to adapt to the changes that will come from climate change.** However, federal land managers only consider 64 percent of species on the list to be threatened by climate change.
- Due to a recent decision by the Department of Interior (DOI) to reduce protections for the delta smelt - a small fish critical to the ecological function of the San Francisco-San Joaquin Delta - **Secretary Bernhardt's former**

client, Westlands Water District, stands to [lock in a lucrative permanent water contract](#) for the Central Valley Project. This contract would nearly double the amount of water that would flow to Secretary Bernhardt's former client, an issue that has raised significant ethical questions and spurred another [ethics investigation](#) into the Secretary.

- Although DOI was ordered on [October 16](#) to adhere to stricter oil and gas permitting requirements outlined in the 2015 Sage-Grouse Management Plan, the agency is moving ahead with several projects that will negatively impact sensitive sage-grouse habitat. **The BLM is offering [at least 117,000 acres of land for oil and gas leases in sensitive sage-grouse habitat in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming](#) and has proposed a [2,000-mile carbon dioxide pipeline](#) that crosses large swaths of sensitive habitat in Wyoming.**

**Want to take action? [Call your Senators and Representatives](#) to ask them to **pass full and permanent funding for the LWCF!** Urge leadership to bring a vote to the floor or pass funding via the budget package! We only have **THIRTEEN legislative days** left in the year. **TELL CONGRESS TO ACT NOW** and [let us know](#) what you hear back.**

*Our work is made possible by the generosity of people like you.  
Thanks to your support we've had another incredible year.  
This holiday season please consider contributing to The Mountain Pact to support the production of conservation updates such as this and the continued fight for the conservation and preservation of America's public lands.*

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