



The Mountain Pact

January Conservation Update

Happy New Year and welcome to your first conservation update of 2020! This update covers conservation news from the end of 2019 and the start of 2020 including appropriations funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF); the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) move to Grand Junction, CO; the Trump administration's new National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) proposal; ongoing concerns about Department of Interior (DOI) ethics violations; and more.



In late December, a Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 spending package was signed into law that [would fund](#) the LWCF at \$495 million. This is the highest funding level the LWCF has received in 17 years but is [still woefully short](#) of the full \$900 million allotted to the fund. **This is a [step in the right direction](#), but it is important now more than ever to keep the pressure on Congress and the administration to fully and permanently fund LWCF. The President's budget is expected to be announced in early February, so [call your Senators and Representatives](#) and let them know that we won't accept anything less than **FULL LWCF FUNDING**.**



- Despite continued opposition and pressure for [cost-benefit documentation](#) from lawmakers and conservation groups, **the BLM went ahead with their plan to move top agency officials to Grand Junction, CO. With the rollout of the plan, the BLM is expected to lose 80% of their D.C. based employees** due to [salary cuts](#) and pressure to relocate. The BLM [ignored lessons](#) from the United States Department of Agriculture which experienced a significant reduction in staff and reduced morale after moving several programs to Kansas City. **However, this may have been the goal as Acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney stated, "the relocations would help the administration attain another goal: draining the swamp, specifically by [shedding federal employees.](#)"**
- Although his tenure as Acting Director of the BLM was set to expire on January 3, William Perry Pendley remains in the position. **Secretary Bernhardt [extended Pendley's role](#) as the Acting Director for an additional three months.** The BLM has now gone three full years without a Senate-confirmed Director, raising questions about the appropriate application of the vacancy rule. **Despite the temporary status of Pendley's position, he is [overseeing permanent](#) and potentially detrimental actions for the agency such as the BLM headquarters move.**
- President Trump's 'energy dominance' agenda may be backfiring. For the fourth time in the last year, the **BLM's Utah office [pulled back thousands of acres](#) of oil and gas leases due to the agency's inadequate environmental analyses that failed to include climate impacts.**
- [Several top DOI officials](#) continue to be the center of ethics investigations. Recently, Douglas W. Domenech, an assistant Interior secretary was **found to have [violated ethics rules](#) by meeting with a former client to discuss reducing protections under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).** Although cleared of one charge of ethics violations, **Secretary Bernhardt remains under investigation for numerous additional charges stating that he pushed for policy changes that would benefit former clients. In fact, a [recent analysis](#) found that Secretary Bernhardt's former employer has seen a significant increase in clients, income, and DOI related project outcomes since Bernhardt became Interior Secretary.**
- Despite ending the 2019 legislative year with a [sub-par climate bill](#), House Democrats **introduced an [expansive and progressive new bill](#) that would target coal, oil, and gas production on public lands; aiming to zero out greenhouse gas emissions from public lands all while supporting workers in a shift toward renewable energy industries.**
- Proposals to [mine uranium near the Grand Canyon](#) are still being considered, regardless of the concerns about the impacts on the environment, human health, and Native American tribes. In December, **a [new bill](#) was introduced that would ban any new uranium mining near the Grand Canyon,** providing hope for the long term protection of the region.
- The ongoing construction of President Trump's border wall is raising ever more [environmental concerns](#). **New sections of the wall cut right through sensitive desert habitat along the Arizona-Mexico border threatening 23 endangered and at-risk species and even pushing eight of these species [towards extinction.](#)**
- In December, former Monsanto researcher Aurelia Skipwith [was confirmed](#) by the Senate to head the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Skipwith **[also has ties](#) to Westlands Water District, an organization that has a history of lobbying against the ESA; a connection that raises concerns about her ability to lead one of two agencies tasked with administering the ESA.**
- In early January, the Trump administration **[unveiled a new proposal](#) that would [unravel one of America's bedrock environmental policies,](#) the**

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA requires federal agencies to assess significant projects before breaking ground. This requires an environmental analysis and opportunities for public input. **The new proposal would limit public involvement and an agency's ability to include climate impacts by limiting the scope of analyses.**

- **Methane leaks from oil and gas infrastructure continue at rapid rates** as the Trump administration continues forward with attempts to loosen regulations.

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