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Vail area elected officials urge Biden administration to protect public lands

Mountain Pact letter signed by county commissioners, Avon council



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The Mountain Pact letter to President-elect Joe Biden urges, among other things, restoration protections for Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments in Utah, reversing the recent oil and gas lease sale in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and working to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. (Rick Bowmer, AP file photo)

The Mountain Pact on Thursday urged President-elect Joe Biden and Deb Haaland, Biden's pick to lead the Department of the Interior, to fight climate change and protect public lands.

The guidance was sent via a [letter](#) signed by more than 80 elected officials in mountain communities; the Eagle County Board of County Commissioners and the Avon Town Council signed the letter along with Vail Mayor Pro Tem Kim Langmaid.

The Mountain Pact was formed in 2014 and stepped up lobbying efforts in 2018 when the Trump administration proposed drastic cuts to the Land and Water Conservation Fund budget; the Mountain Pact lobbied Congress with trips to Washington, D.C., which Avon Mayor Sarah Smith Hymes joined.

Hymes, on Tuesday, described the Mountain Pact as an organization which lobbies in favor of “issues of most importance to mountain communities that have been impacted by the energy dominance policies of the previous administration.”

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was fully funded in 2020 as part of the Great American Outdoors Act, which was passed in the summer of 2020 and is set to provide a massive influx of funding for a maintenance backlog at national parks, wildlife refuges, public lands and American Indian schools.

The Great American Outdoors Act was included in Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which was signed into law by President Donald Trump on Dec. 27.

In the Mountain Pact’s letter to Biden and Haaland, the pact urges the Biden administration and 117th Congress to consider three major courses of action. The first is to “fight the climate crisis with bold action” by halting new oil and gas leases on public lands and waters and rejecting any royalty relief and lease suspension provisions for the oil and gas industry in future COVID relief packages. The pact also urges, as part of that goal, to “support state and local clean energy building requirements and initiatives, emissions reduction programs, and utilities with renewable energy goals.”

The second course of action is to “help our western communities” by including conservation-friendly financial support for local governments in future COVID relief packages, modernizing the country’s public lands royalty system to “ensure that those who profit from them provide a fair return to the taxpayers,” ensuring the outdoors is a place for all by prioritizing environmental justice, and restoring environmental and public health safeguards.

The third goal is to “protect our public lands” by restoring protections for Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments in Utah, reversing the recent oil and gas lease sale in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and working to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.

The letter says mountain communities are shouldering the burden of increased unemployment, as well as public lands infrastructure needs and costly climate impacts.

“Over the last four years, we’ve watched as there has been an increase in antiquated fossil fuel development on public lands, weakened environmental regulations, and fast tracking or eliminating environmental reviews for proposed projects,” the letter reads. “Public lands should no longer be given away for pennies on the dollar, financial support should be provided to local governments amidst the pandemic, and meaningful actions should be taken to both address the climate crisis and protect our public lands.”