
DAVID WATKINS
STAFF DIRECTOR

VIVIAN MOEGLEIN
REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

April 22, 2021

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

As you know, the relocation and reorganization of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) headquarters and staff has been a longstanding subject of concern for the Committee. This ill-conceived, poorly planned, and shoddily executed effort damaged a critical land management agency. I applaud you and your staff's efforts to ensure that BLM's next steps are driven by career staff input and the priorities of the agency, not by political agendas and favor-trading.¹

While we await the results of ongoing staff consultations, I wanted to offer my view, as Chair of the Committee on Natural Resources, that BLM will be most effective if its headquarters and senior staff return to Washington, D.C. The agency is America's single largest land manager, overseeing 245 million acres of land and more than 700 million acres of mineral estate (comprising the majority of federal oil and gas and mining sites). It is a key manager for wildlife, habitat areas, and cultural resources. The role of this agency will only grow as you and President Biden work to protect our public lands and communities across the country from the impacts of climate change.

When the Trump administration first announced its intent to move BLM headquarters far outside Washington, D.C., the Committee was prepared to consider the case for its relocation, complete with data-driven justifications and a clear demonstration of benefits. As you no doubt recall, the planning materials BLM sent for the Committee's review fell far short of making this case. While the Trump administration often rhetorically touted the benefits of the move, they never provided evidence for their claims.

Congress was given limited notice and few details before the move and was asked to rely on one internally contradictory and opaque letter as a complete rationale for what can only be described as a major agency shakeup. Notably, even before this move, more than 90 percent of BLM staff were already stationed outside of Washington, D.C., in states across the West. After staff-level communications, two full Committee hearings, a Subcommittee hearing, a formal document request, and six additional requests for information, it became abundantly clear that this relocation was not conceived or executed in the best interests of the American people. The Government Accountability Office confirmed these suspicions, finding BLM largely failed to meet best practices and virtually ignored staff and stakeholder input throughout the process.² Viewed in light of the damaging and foreseeable consequences of the move, the total lack of substantive

¹ Streater, S. (2021, April 7). BLM survey finds distrust of Trump-era senior leaders. *E&E News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063729421>

² Government Accountability Office. (2020, March 6). Bureau of Land Management: Agency's Reorganization Efforts Did Not Substantially Address Key Practices for Effective Reforms [GAO-20-397R]. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-397r>

rationale for the reorganization strongly suggested that it was intended to cripple the agency. Allowing this move to stand would only justify the Trump administration's bad-faith efforts and could open the door to similarly destructive actions under future administrations.

The damage to BLM from this relocation and reorganization has been severe. Staffing data only released when President Biden took office show that after being asked to relocate from Washington, D.C. to Grand Junction, Colo., 87 percent of affected BLM staff either retired, quit, or found other work.³ This drastic staff exodus has resulted in an incalculable loss of institutional knowledge about protecting our lands and resources. We also know based on recent staff survey data that this move significantly impacted employee morale and trust in senior leadership.⁴ The reorganization and relocation have severely damaged the agency and the faith of longtime public servants in the mission to which they have dedicated their lives and careers.

The BLM headquarters is now housed more than 1,000 miles away from those of the other federal agencies responsible for protecting our public lands. This distance, simply put, serves no legitimate purpose. It is already putting needless barriers between BLM and its partner agencies, and between BLM and the Department as a whole. The distance will inconvenience the many parties who rely on BLM – such as tribal nations and state governments – who will now have to travel to both Grand Junction and Washington, D.C., to present their priorities to decision-makers.

While I sympathize with the people of Grand Junction and other communities who may have benefitted from having some BLM staff stationed there, and I fully support filling vacancies in state and field offices across the West in a timely way, we need to ensure that senior agency staff are in a position to carry out their duties on behalf of this key federal agency as efficiently as possible. As the Trump administration's boasts about forcing government employees to leave their jobs demonstrated, that was never the goal of the move to Grand Junction.

President Biden has set out an ambitious agenda for our public lands. That agenda cannot be carried out if the responsible agencies cannot effectively and efficiently carry out their legal mandates. For BLM, this starts by listening to staff and ensuring that science and policy—not politics—guide operations and high-level decision-making. From my perspective as Chair of the Committee, this means ensuring that BLM's headquarters and senior staff are brought back to Washington, D.C.

I appreciate your consideration of this matter. If you or your staff would like any further information about this issue, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or Committee staffer Henry Wykowski at Henry.Wykowski@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Chair
House Committee on Natural Resources

³ Eilperin, J. (2021, January 28). Trump officials moved most Bureau of Land Management positions out of D.C. More than 87 percent quit instead. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/01/28/trump-blm-reorganization/>

⁴ U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (2020). Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 2nd Level Subagency Comparison Report: Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. Retrieved from https://www.eenews.net/assets/2021/04/07/document_gw_01.pdf