

March 29, 2021

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Interior Secretary. We look forward to working with you and others in the Department and bureaus.

July 16th, 2021 marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM was constructed out of the General Land Office and Grazing Service. Marion Clawson, the BLM's first director in 1948, came from a Nevada ranching and mining family and was acutely aware of the western politics and traditions that were driving management of BLM lands. Recognizing the monumental task before him of trying to keep the BLM afloat in a time when hostility toward the new agency was common in the West, Director Clawson sought to develop a western-based agency with most staff in district and field offices rather than in Washington.

The legacy of a decentralized agency remains in place today with 97% of BLM staff in western states and a relatively small presence of the BLM actually in Washington. This structure has enabled BLM state, district and field offices to work with local stakeholders and drive important decisions affecting our public lands. However, in recognition that the BLM is a federal agency charged with stewarding lands on behalf of all Americans, it is also imperative that some critical positions are based in D.C.

We write you today as stakeholders on the ground in Colorado who are deeply invested in both the future of our nation's public lands and Colorado's communities, economy and way of life. We are seeking resolution to the attempt of the previous administration to dismantle the BLM by scattering its leadership to various offices across the West, including Grand Junction, Colorado, and we wish to provide recommendations for revitalizing the BLM so we can all get to work on the challenges ahead.

We look forward to welcoming you to Colorado, and we hope your visit will be an opportunity to celebrate an expanded, sustainable and functional presence of the agency in western Colorado in this 75th anniversary year.

Guiding Principles

The last administration has left us with a damaged and demoralized agency, and we must rebuild. We believe there is a win-win solution for the BLM and for Colorado that involves maintaining both a national headquarters in Washington D.C. and a prominent western office in

Grand Junction, where some agency leadership would be based. We suggest the following principles should guide the rebuilding of the agency:

- Keep an important national presence in Grand Junction. The focus of this National Western Office should be on issues that have significant stakeholder engagement on the ground, such as recreation, conservation, and restoration. A new landscape-scale initiative should be established for reaching resiliency through conservation and restoration. Leadership based in the National Western Office could include appropriate staff that are key to resiliency, recreation, conservation and restoration efforts.
- In determining the structure of the National Western Office, prioritize the well-being of career staff and the economic impact to western Colorado. For example, providing the option for staff who are not necessary in D.C. to live and work in Colorado instead could be a welcome benefit for career staff. The new structure should also contribute at least the same level of jobs and economic impact that has been anticipated, but not realized, by the current headquarters relocation plan.
- Return critical national positions to the Washington D.C. Headquarters. This includes the BLM Director, deputy directors and assistant directors as well as staff that are needed in D.C. for regular coordination with other federal agencies, Congress and D.C.-based stakeholders.
- Minimize additional trauma to the BLM by phasing in changes for positions that will need to relocate back to D.C. This could involve a transition period for currently filled positions, whereas vacant positions would simply be hired in their new location.

Recommendations for Rebuilding

The decision to establish the new “headquarters” in Grand Junction has been a source of pride in western Colorado, and was expected to create new well-paying jobs here. However, the promise of a fully-functional western headquarters never came to pass. The actual implementation of the reorganization was a disgrace. Of the 328 positions that were proposed to move from the D.C. headquarters to various locations out West, only 41 positions were actually hired in the West. The other 287 HQ employees left the agency. Right now, the agency is short on staff, demoralized and in disarray.

The actions of the Trump administration have harmed the BLM by dispersing its leadership, losing many experienced personnel, and narrowing its focus to fossil fuel development. As a result, the BLM is not currently functioning well, and is neither fulfilling its multiple-use mandate nor equipped for the important role it must play to meet our nation’s climate goals and manage for increasing demands for recreation, restoration, wildfire and habitat needs.

We believe there is a path forward to revitalize the BLM while maintaining the new Grand Junction office. We urge you to reformat the Grand Junction “headquarters” as a National Western Office focused on recreation, conservation and restoration - emerging and important

parts of the agency's multiple-use mission. Our western public lands are ground zero for many of the impacts of climate change, are experiencing increasing recreation demands and conflicts, and also contain outstanding BLM wildlands. Addressing these important issues requires significant stakeholder engagement on the ground. In this context, the National Western Office could house a regional leadership position, such as a new National Recreation, Conservation and Restoration Office Director.

The National Western Office could also play a key role in our national efforts toward the 30x30 goal, which will necessarily include public land conservation. As the Biden administration develops and implements programs and initiatives integral to the success of achieving 30x30, having certain BLM leadership close to the lands and communities where implementation will occur will help facilitate the collaboration necessary for the long term success of this ambitious and critical initiative.

We additionally recommend the BLM establish a new Healthy Landscape Initiative Program for reaching resiliency through conservation and restoration. This new landscape-scale program, based in Grand Junction, can best institutionalize the conservation and restoration initiatives. It would also be consistent with the Biden administration's 'Build Back Better' and 30x30 priorities. Leadership and staff for this overarching initiative, located in the National Western Office, would provide a critical dimension and recognition for the BLM in Grand Junction. Additionally, Colorado Mesa University has 15,000 faculty, staff and students eager to partner with the BLM on research into issues relevant to this initiative such as recreation, wildfires, wildlife management and climate science.

A BLM National Western Office as proposed would strongly complement the region's strengths as a leading case study of a transitioning economy and changing relationship to the land. In Grand Junction, diversifying the economy with a focus on promoting the outdoor recreation industry and location-neutral workers attracted to local outdoor recreation opportunities has led to increased prosperity and economic performance. The BLM and its national presence in Grand Junction will have a positive overall impact on communities in western Colorado and across the West by helping expand the model to other rural communities. Nearby BLM lands feature three National Conservation Areas cherished for both the lands protected and the recreation opportunities they afford, making the area a natural flagship for a national office focused on themes of recreation, conservation and restoration.

Staffing the National Western Office would be a draw for new and existing staff focused on restoration, conservation and recreation whose jobs may be best served by being located in the West. Having a defined role for this office will also be more attractive and seen as a stable location that will not be changed on a political whim. Further, staffing should be conducted in a way that supports existing BLM personnel that want to relocate, and those personnel and positions already relocated to Grand Junction should be given opportunities to decide where they would prefer to work as much as possible. Any relocations should be phased in to provide the maximum support to staff. It is important to respect and support BLM employees who have already been subjected to a difficult set of demands. Notably, there are positions and personnel that were relocated around the West as part of dispersing the national headquarters; they would

be affected by relocating positions to the National Western Office and, again, this relocation must be carefully managed and discussed with affected BLM offices and individuals.

At the same time, the BLM needs a strong leadership presence in Washington D.C. where the agency can support the Administration's priorities by collaborating with sister agencies, the Secretary's office, and Congress. A Washington D.C. headquarters also ensures that constituents can efficiently meet with leadership and other agencies and congressional representation. The agency can maintain both a D.C. headquarters for the positions that need to be there and an important western hub to fill a national leadership role that is uniquely suited to a western location. This approach would make the National Western Office part of leading the BLM towards the future, while reforming and rebuilding after the damage done through the bad faith of the last administration.

Thank you for considering this letter as you evaluate next steps for rebuilding the BLM.

Sincerely,

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