

# Former BLM official who opposed Trump-era HQ move dies

By Scott Streater

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Henri Bisson, a former senior Bureau of Land Management official during the George W. Bush administration who later became a vocal critic of the Trump-era relocation of BLM's national headquarters to Colorado, died Monday.

Bisson, who retired from BLM in 2009 after 34 years and also served as president of the Public Lands Foundation, the bureau's influential retirees' organization, died of liver cancer in Tucson, Ariz., according to PLF and several friends who were retired senior BLM officials. He was 75.

Bisson served during Bush's second term as deputy director of operations — the bureau's top career position that oversees the daily operations of its roughly 10,000 employees that manage the bureau's 245 million acres.

He was later appointed in 2007 by former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne as acting senior adviser to the secretary on Alaska affairs, while continuing to serve as the operations head.

Bisson had served as BLM's Alaska state office director from 2002 until 2006.

"The news of Henri's sudden death came as a big shock to those of us that worked with him in the BLM and in the broader public lands arena," said Ed Shepard, a BLM retiree who took over as president of the Public Lands Foundation from Bisson in 2013.

"Henri was a leader dedicated to the public lands and to the BLM throughout his long career and his retirement," Shepard added. "To many of the BLM employees, and to me personally, he was a valued peer, boss, adviser and mentor, but mostly a good friend."

Similar tributes poured in Monday and early Tuesday for Bisson, who remained active on BLM issues after his 2009 retirement.

Steve Ellis, a former BLM deputy director of operations during the Obama administration who retired in 2016, worked directly for Bisson when he was director of the bureau's Alaska office.

"He was a very dedicated public servant," Ellis said.

Mary Jo Rugwell, the Public Lands Foundation's current president, also noted that in retirement Bisson "continued to support public lands and resources" during a three-year stint as PLF president, and as the chair of the group's development committee.

"He was highly respected and will be missed," said Rugwell, who retired in 2019 as director of BLM's Wyoming state office.

Bisson was an active voice on BLM issues in recent years, most notably as an outspoken critic of the Trump administration's decision to relocate the national headquarters to Grand Junction, Colo., and out of Washington, D.C.

He was part of a coalition organized by PLF that in 2019 visited with congressional leaders from both parties in Washington to lobby against the relocation.

Then-Interior Secretary David Bernhardt argued that the headquarters move, along with the relocation of hundreds of other D.C.-based positions to BLM offices across the West, would bring the bureau's senior leadership closer to the land BLM manages.

Bisson joined former BLM Director Bob Abbey, who led the bureau during former President Barack Obama's first term, and then-Natural Resources Committee Chair Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) at a D.C. press conference opposing the proposed move ([Greenwire](#), Dec. 11, 2019).

Bisson argued at the time that the change would result in BLM's leadership being "outsized and marginalized" and that most employees would not move "for family reasons."

"The resulting loss of so many senior employees will cripple BLM for many years to come," Bisson said.

A Government Accountability Office report examining the relocation later reported that most staffers chose to retire or quit rather than move, and that it resulted in reducing the numbers of Black and Asian employees in key headquarters positions ([Greenwire](#), Nov. 18, 2021).

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland later moved the national headquarters' office back to Washington and designated the Grand Junction office a "Western hub" for the bureau ([E&E News PM](#), Sept. 17, 2021).

Bisson was also an outspoken critic of William Perry Pendley, the conservative lawyer who helped spearhead the headquarters move. Former President Donald Trump formally nominated Pendley — at the time BLM's deputy director of policy and programs — as BLM director ([E&E News PM](#), June 26, 2020).

Bisson and Elaine Zielinski, a former BLM Arizona state director, authored an op-ed published in *The Arizona Republic* shortly after the nomination urging then-Sen. Martha McSally, an Arizona Republican who was considered a key swing vote, to oppose Pendley's confirmation ([Greenwire](#), July 31, 2020).

Trump would eventually withdraw Pendley's nomination after it became clear he did not have the votes needed for Senate confirmation ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 15, 2020).

Bisson started his career as a forester at BLM in 1974, shortly after graduating from the University of New Hampshire with a bachelor's of science degree in forestry.

He would later earn a master's of science in watershed management from the University of Arizona and quickly rose through the ranks at BLM, serving as manager of both the Phoenix and California Desert districts.

He also served as assistant director for renewable resources and planning in BLM's headquarters in Washington.

Shepard followed Bisson as assistant director for renewable resources and credits Bisson for always being available "to answer any questions and to offer advice" on the position.

"He was the type of guy that I could have serious discussions with and strongly disagree, but at the end, we'd both be smiling and ready to move onto the next issue," Shepard said. "He always had our backs and the best interests of the BLM employees and the resources in mind. Henry's legacy in BLM will be long lasting, and I miss him. We all do."