Secret Report Leaves the Fate of National Monuments Unknown

We’re writing you with an update on the Department of Interior national monument review. This unprecedented review of existing land protections came to a close on August 24 when Secretary Zinke issued his recommendations in a secret report to President Trump, informing the public only that changes would be made to a 'handful' of national monuments – keeping us in the dark as to the fate of large swaths of our national public lands. We are now awaiting the President’s decision; the White House has not yet announced when that decision will be made public.

In April, President Trump issued an executive order instructing Secretary Zinke to begin this review of all national monuments over 100,000 acres that had been established since 1996 (the year that President Clinton established the 1.9 million acre Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument in Utah).

Secretary Zinke’s National Monument Review Recommendations
On August 24, the Secretary gave his final recommendations to the President in a secret document, releasing only a vague report to the public. In keeping with an interim report, Secretary Zinke recommended that the recently designated Bears Ears National Monument in Utah be significantly reduced in size. Although the Secretary’s report did not mention any national monuments by name, sources close to the matter have said that he also recommended that Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument (UT), Cascade–Siskiyou National Monument (OR), and Gold Butte National Monument (NV) be reduced in size. However, until the report is made public, we will not know what other monuments the Secretary is recommending to shrink, only that he is recommending reducing the borders of a 'handful' of national monuments.

Getting rid of vast portions of America's national monuments will result in economic harm to local businesses, lost access for hunting and fishing, and the destruction of Native American archaeological sites.

In Secretary Zinke’s public statement he said that shutting down vast portions of America’s national monuments is to return the land to historical multiple uses – meaning opening the
lands up for mining, drilling, grazing, and logging. This risks harming biodiversity, along with any historic, scientific, and cultural sites that were previously protected under national monument status. Currently, many national monument designations maintain historical uses such as existing water rights, grazing, and logging, making the desire to open more lands up for these uses unnecessary and potentially illegal.

Changing monument designations is a position extremely unpopular with the American public. During the Interior’s 60–day comment period an unprecedented 2.8 million comments were submitted, and 98% were in favor of keeping all national monument designations as they are, and allowing continued use of the Antiquities Act to protect more areas of federal land.

Going forward, any attempt for the Administration to act on these recommendations is sure to be met in court. Due to previous decisions upholding the necessity of landscape-scale national monument designations, as well as the language of the Antiquities Act, any attempt for the President to unilaterally remove protections will likely be found illegal.

What Does This Mean for Mountain Communities?
These lands provide countless diverse recreational opportunities that bolster the $887 billion dollar outdoor recreation economy – an economy that pumps billions of dollars, and many rural jobs into communities in close proximity to national monuments and other public lands. Our western communities rely on public lands to attract visitors, residents, and businesses, and this attack on public lands protections further shows the Administration’s commitment to extractive industries and special interest groups. The closure of these lands would deal a devastating blow to our communities that rely on them.

The Mountain Pact is working to gather more information about the Secretary’s recommendations, and will keep you updated as any more detailed information becomes available. We will keep fighting for our national public lands and the communities that depend upon their health and continued protection.