Public Lands Mismanagement Puts our Communities at Risk

The last few weeks have brought many changes and challenges to the management of our federal public lands. The ongoing partial government shutdown has left many of our federal lands open but understaffed which is threatening ecosystem health, public safety, and the economies of nearby communities. In addition, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke stepped down leaving David Bernhardt as the Acting Secretary of the Interior. Many fear that Bernhardt, a former oil lobbyist, will lead the Department of Interior (DOI) with a continued focus on 'energy dominance' over all other uses of public lands.

Government Shutdown and Federal Public Lands
On December 22, the federal government entered a partial shutdown due to a standoff between Congress and President Trump over funding for a border wall. As part of the shutdown, the Trump Administration chose to leave national parks, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Forest Service (USFS) lands open, but unstaffed. This has frustrated many as concerns over abuse of our public lands continue to rise. The shutdown has extended through the holidays and new year, one of the busiest times for national parks and other federal public lands visitation. In Yosemite National Park, officials have limited visitors due to garbage and human waste being disposed of improperly, Crater Lake National Park has closed its southern road due to the impacts of human waste buildup on the Park's water, and in Joshua Tree National Park all campgrounds have been closed due to illegal camping and toilets nearly reaching capacity. In some cases, parks have closed due to similar concerns. With hundreds of thousands of federal employees and contractors unpaid during this time, our public lands, and communities that depend on public lands visitation are suffering.

In parks such as Joshua Tree, volunteers have stepped up to take care of some basic maintenance like emptying trash. Some states have even paid to keep park operations going. New York, Arizona, Utah, and Puerto Rico have chosen to fund continued operations at some of their most visited national parks. And, on Sunday, January 6, Acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt authorized national parks to use money from entrance fees for some national parks to pay employees for basic maintenance. Some conservationists and congressional Democrats are calling
this highly controversial move illegal due to what national park maintenance fees are legally intended for.

The negative impacts of reduced operations at national parks and understaffed BLM and USFS lands extends beyond just those that had hoped to visit public lands and the employees who are suddenly out of work. Nearby communities and businesses are experiencing challenges due to changes in visitation. Our communities are inextricably linked to the public lands that surround them. Without management and oversight, the ecosystems that the Interior Department is mandated to protect are at risk from illegal activity and no enforcement. This threatens the tourism dollars visitation brings as well as the economic success and cultural vitality of the communities that rely on these lands.

CLICK HERE to read and hear a NPR story with John Wentworth, a city council member in Mammoth Lakes, California. Mammoth Lakes is surrounded by federal lands and they are feeling the impact of the shutdown in many ways.

Acting Secretary David Bernhardt

Secretary Zinke, who was responsible for the decision to leave national parks open yet understaffed during the government shutdown, resigned on January 2, amidst numerous ethics investigations. Secretary Zinke has been highly criticized for his role in removing public lands protections.

However, his temporary replacement, David Bernhardt, a former oil lobbyist, has a track record that concerns many conservationists.

Bernhardt has a long history at DOI, but had previously been employed as a lobbyist with several energy and coal companies as clients. Many fear that Bernhardt's numerous conflicts of interest will mean he manages public lands for the benefit of oil, gas, and coal companies rather than the American public. Bernhardt has made clear that the goals at DOI are the goals of the President, including deregulation and relaxing environmental standards for oil and gas companies. Bernhardt has already made his mark at DOI by spearheading the revision of the historic collaborative sage-grouse management plan. This revision opens up 9 million acres of previously protected sensitive habitat to oil and gas leasing.

If this is any indication of what to expect from the Acting Secretary, we must be sure to speak up now and continue to make our voices heard so that 'energy dominance' does not remain the only consideration for public lands management. As Bernhardt takes charge in the new year, we hope he is a good neighbor to Western communities that rely on healthy and well managed public lands.

Want to make sure Acting Secretary Bernhardt listens to and hears your community’s voice? Let us know if you'd be interested in writing a Letter to the Editor or Opinion Editorial piece to local media.