

POLITICS

Congress debates Bureau of Land Management move to Grand Junction

BLM's acting director, a Coloradan, and several Colorado members of Congress discuss



RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post

Rain moves over the cliffs at Colorado National Monument on Aug. 5, 2019, in Grand Junction, Colorado.

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PUBLISHED: September 10, 2019 at 2:41 pm | UPDATED: September 10, 2019 at

2:49 pm

The acting director of the Bureau of Land Management on Tuesday defended his agency's decision to [move its headquarters to Grand Junction](#) in the face of criticisms that it will cause career employees to depart, will needlessly cost federal coffers and will harm tribal interests.

"Nearly every Western state will realize significant benefits from this reorganization," [William Perry Pendley](#), a longtime Colorado resident and lawyer, told the House Natural Resources Committee.

In mid-July, [it was announced](#) that BLM will move its headquarters and 27 top staffers to Grand Junction. Supporters of the plan, led by Republican Sen. Cory Gardner of Yuma, say it moves decision-making closer to the federal lands that BLM oversees. Critics say the real goal is to cut the size of BLM, effectively weakening the public lands agency.

"I don't think it's a question of distrust in the people of Grand Junction," said Rep. Raul Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee, [during the hearing Tuesday](#). "It's the distrust that's centered on this (Trump) administration, their motivations, and what is really behind the move that we're here trying to get at."

Tuesday's hearing was solely for oversight purposes; there is no current legislation to stop the BLM move to Grand Junction. Some Democrats [have vowed to do so](#) through the appropriations process, but it's not yet clear whether they will have the votes or time to accomplish that.

Republicans on the committee praised the move as a step toward President Donald Trump's goal of "draining the swamp" of Washington, D.C. But Democrats were divided, with some outright criticizing the move and others more politely questioning Pendley on it.

[Rep. Diana DeGette](#), a Denver Democrat, asked for assurance that the relocation will improve the agency's current staffing problems. Pendley cast doubts on predictions that many people will resign from BLM rather than move to Grand Junction.

"I was a little surprised by testimony that mentioned 40 percent of the employees in D.C. would not want to move," Robin Brown, director of the Grand Junction Economic Partnership and a supporter of the relocation, told the committee. "I would argue that if you have a BLM employee who doesn't want to live near BLM land, that's probably a sign that you should reorganize."

[Rep. Doug Lamborn](#), a Colorado Springs Republican, told Pendley that the relocation will make BLM more effective. Pendley told Lamborn it's his desire that BLM not lose a single employee after affected workers are told next week about their options. Those who won't move to Grand Junction could be offered other jobs within the Department of Interior, according to Pendley.

In addition to partisan divides, the two-hour hearing showcased rural-urban divides. Rep. Paul Gosar, an Arizona Republican, said he liked the move to Grand Junction because "we don't see the big-city corruption" there. But others questioned whether Grand Junction has adequate access to cheap airfare, broadband internet and other amenities in abundance in Washington.

Tony Small, vice chairman of the Ute Indian Tribal Business Committee, said Native American tribes had not been properly consulted about the BLM headquarters move. He said BLM will become "a tool of special interests" if it leaves Washington, much to the detriment of tribes.

[Rep. Joe Neguse](#), a Lafayette Democrat, used his time to question Pendley on matters other than the BLM move. He asked the acting director to disavow [an op-ed Pendley wrote in 2016](#) that claimed the "Founding Fathers intended all lands owned by the federal government to be sold."

"I love America's public lands," Pendley told Neguse. "I have never advocated the wholesale disposal or transfer of those lands. More importantly, as a loyal and proud member of the Trump administration, I support the president and (Interior) Secretary Bernhardt in their crystal-clear opposition to the wholesale disposal or transfer of public lands."

Neguse suggested Pendley may still support an end to public lands, but Pendley said that Congress, not the BLM, decides whether to sell public lands.

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