

INTERIOR

Advocate for federal land sales ascends to top at BLM

Scott Streater, E&E News reporter • Published: Thursday, July 25, 2019



Attorney William Perry Pendley has risen to the top spot at the Bureau of Land Management. @Sagebrush_Rebel/Twitter

William Perry Pendley, a conservative lawyer who has supported the selling of millions of acres of federal lands to Western states, is now the top political official overseeing the Bureau of Land Management — only a week after joining the agency.

Pendley, who until December served as president of the conservative law firm Mountain States Legal Foundation, was appointed BLM deputy director of policy and programs last week ([Greenwire](#), July 15).

But now Pendley is listed on BLM's online [organization chart](#), along with BLM Deputy Director of Operations Mike Nedd, as leading the bureau that manages 245 million acres of public lands, mostly in the West.

President Trump has never nominated a BLM director for Senate confirmation, so the top slot has been overseen by "acting" directors and deputies since 2017.

Casey Hammond, the Interior Department's principal deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management, served the past two months as a de facto acting director. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt designated Hammond with the power to exercise all "functions, duties, and responsibilities" of the BLM director through the end of this month.

But that detail, approved by Bernhardt in an amended [secretarial order](#) last May, has ended. Hammond appears to have returned to his senior post at Interior; he is no longer listed on BLM's webpage as leading the bureau on an acting basis.

It's not clear whether Bernhardt plans to name a new acting director. Representatives with Interior and BLM ignored multiple requests for information or comment on this story.

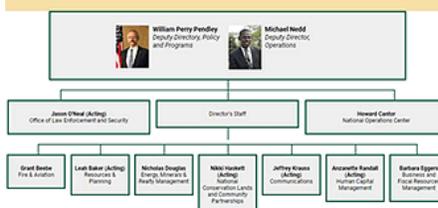
An Interior source told E&E News that little has been communicated to senior staff, but that Pendley and Nedd appear to be co-directing the bureau, with Hammond helping to guide the operation from his post at Interior.

The latest moves continue a trend of near-constant leadership flux at BLM under the Trump administration, which in the past 2 ½ years has appointed a variety of acting directors, including Nedd, who served a seven-month stint as acting director in 2017.

Among the temporary BLM leaders was Brian Steed, who like Pendley was also deputy director of policy and programs before leaving last month for a Cabinet-level position in Utah Republican Gov. Gary Herbert's administration. Then-Interior

ORGANIZATION CHART

With headquarters in Washington D.C., our approximately 10,000 employees work in state, district, and field offices throughout the continental United States and Alaska.



Secretary Ryan Zinke designated Steed as "exercising authority of the director."

[+] The Interior Department updated its online organization chart for the Bureau of Land Management to include new Deputy Director Pendley in the agency's top spot. BLM

"Neither the public, the agency, nor the employees are served by a continuation of musical chair directors," said Ed Shepard, president of the Public Lands Foundation, a BLM retirees organization.

Shepard, who retired from BLM in 2012 after a 38-year career, said he's concerned that the latest shuffling of senior leadership comes a week after the Interior Department announced it plans to relocate BLM's Washington, D.C.-based headquarters to Grand Junction, Colo., with dozens of other senior leadership positions fanning out to cities in Utah, Arizona, Idaho and New Mexico.

"With all that is currently going on with the bureau at this time, we encourage the secretary to work with the White House to nominate a permanent director," he said.

Selling off federal lands?

While Nedd has been at BLM for more than three decades and has held numerous senior posts, Pendley started at the bureau on July 15.

Pendley served as Interior deputy assistant secretary for energy and minerals during the Reagan administration; but he has not worked for Interior or any of its bureaus in decades.

His appointment last week to the second-highest-ranked political position at BLM — behind Hammond — caught some bureau officials and observers off guard.

Pendley was, however, in the running for the Interior secretary nomination last year shortly after Zinke abruptly resigned ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 29).

But the fact that Pendley has advocated for the federal government to sell its federal lands to individual states in the West has made him controversial.

In January 2016, Pendley authored an [opinion](#) article in the *National Review* in which he decried federal land ownership, and argued the U.S. Constitution all but requires the federal government to sell the lands it owns in the West.

He listed states like Colorado, Montana, New Mexico and Washington as having large amounts of federally owned land, while other states like New Hampshire and Michigan do not. "Something about this seems unfair," he wrote.

"The Founding Fathers intended all lands owned by the federal government to be sold," he wrote.

Pendley has also written a number of books expressing similar views. Among them is "Warriors for the West: Fighting Bureaucrats, Radical Groups, and Liberal Judges on America's Frontier." It chronicles the efforts of Western state leaders and residents to fight environmental laws, according to a profile of Pendley by the Property Rights Foundation of America.

But Pendley is probably best known as the former president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, which was founded in 1977 to counter litigation from environmental activists. The foundation's first president was James Watt, who later became President Reagan's Interior secretary, and it counts Gale Norton, President George W. Bush's Interior secretary, among its former employees ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 2, 2014).

Pendley was named president of the foundation in 1989, and held that title for nearly 30 years.

Pendley, until leaving the foundation last year, represented Garfield and Kane counties in Utah as defendant-intervenors in a lawsuit challenging President Trump's decision to slash the size of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 14).

Pendley's Twitter handle is @Sagebrush_Rebel — a reference to the "Sagebrush Rebellion," a grassroots movement in the late 1970s that protested federal land management policies under the Carter administration.

Pendley's last Twitter post was July 9. "Taking a break. Thanks for following," he wrote.

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