

Top Trump officials tell Bureau of Land Management staff most of them must leave D.C. by end of next year

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The Interior Department will relocate 84 percent of headquarters staff to the West

By [Juliet Eilperin](#) and [Darryl Fears](#)
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Senior Trump administration officials confirmed Tuesday that the vast majority of Bureau of Land Management headquarters staffers must leave Washington by the end of next year under the Interior Department’s reorganization plan.

In a [17-page letter](#) to lawmakers, Joe Balash, Interior’s assistant secretary for land and minerals, detailed how the administration plans to move 84 percent of the agency’s headquarters staff west of the Rockies by the end of 2020. The relocation, which The Washington Post [first outlined](#) Monday, will move all but 60 Washington-based staffers, a sweeping change to the agency that manages more than 10 percent of America’s land.

“This implementation plan will delegate more responsibility and authority down to the field, optimize services available to the American people, is demonstrably cost-effective, and will provide an increased presence closer to the resources the BLM staff manages,” Balash wrote to Sen. Tom Udall (N.M.), the top Democrat on the Appropriations subcommittee on Interior and environment.

A total of 27 leadership jobs will be relocated to Grand Junction, Colo., about 60 miles south of Interior Secretary David Bernhardt’s childhood home of Rifle, “as part of an initiative to

establish the Headquarters,” Balash said. Colorado will receive more reassigned positions than any state — 85.

Seventy-four of the reassigned employees will report to BLM state directors instead of headquarters staff, he said, and staffers will be reassigned to states including Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

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Although Balash provided an estimated cost benefit of the reassignments — at least \$50 million over 20 years — there was no analysis of the price of the actual move beyond \$5.6 million for the first 27 employees who volunteer.

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Hours before Interior formally notified Capitol Hill of the move, Balash and Casey Hammond, the principal deputy assistant secretary of land and minerals management — who has been running the bureau on an acting basis since May — provided employees with details about the reorganization.

According to a participant in the employee briefing at the agency’s office in Southeast Washington, the tension in the room was palpable as employees questioned what the move would mean for those with two-career families or other obligations that might tie them to Washington. The staffer spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation.

When Hammond declared “There is no need to panic,” the participant said, several people in the audience laughed.

“This announcement is deeply unsettling, and has created a lot of uncertainty for us,” the participant said. “The best part of my job is my co-workers, and they are working to tear us apart for purely political reasons. I’m sick to my stomach.”

Hammond and Balash emphasized the relocation would save the government money because the cost of living was cheaper out West and the lease on the BLM’s main building, in Southeast

Washington, was set to expire. But one employee suggested in the meeting that staffers' pay will also decline once they relocate and urged colleagues to write their member of Congress, prompting applause.

Other employees embraced the reorganization, according to the meeting participant, asking how early they can leave Washington.

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Balash also said that officials are looking to relocate staffers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey, but the department has not done as comprehensive an analysis of those moves.

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Several lawmakers have already embraced the reorganization plan, including Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) and Republican Reps. Rob Bishop (Utah) and Scott R. Tipton (Colo.). In a statement Monday, Bishop said that he would work with Bernhardt to place the staffers moving to Utah in the right place.

“The BLM personnel will be moved where they will have a greater impact on, and input by, the people who live in the regions where their influence is greatest,” Bishop said. “Not by bureaucrats from thousands of miles away.”

But critics of the plan such as Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), who chairs the House Subcommittee on Interior, environment, and related agencies, said in a statement that it made no sense for the administration to unilaterally reorganize an agency when the president has yet to nominate a permanent director for the BLM after more than 2 1/2 years in office.

“After my discussion with Secretary Bernhardt this morning, serious questions remain: What are the benefits to the Interior Department and to the American public? What problem will this move solve? Why is BLM singled out for this move? How much will the move cost?” McCollum asked.

“Assuming the goal is to improve efficiency, streamline operations, and improve lines of communication,” McCollum added, “perhaps Mr. Bernhardt should prioritize securing a permanent director — which BLM has lacked for the duration of this administration — before the Department spends millions of taxpayer dollars playing musical chairs with employees’ lives.” ▲

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Kate Kelly, public lands director for the liberal think tank Center for American Progress, questioned in an email why the administration would reassign nearly all of the bureau’s D.C. staff when 95 percent of them already work out in the field.

“The true impact of this move is to make the agency and its leadership invisible in a city where — like it or not — the decisions about budgets and policies are made,” she said. “The constant shuffling, shrinking and disassembling of BLM’s workforce will have long-term implications for the health of the agency.”

In a telephone conference with reporters later in the afternoon, led by Balash and Susan Combs, the assistant secretary for policy, management and budget, another reason for the move was offered: eliminating travel costs to the District for westerners who meet with BLM officials.

“The American public interested in BLM can talk to a decision-maker without having to travel to the east coast,” Combs said. “I think it’s a disservice to the American public if we’re not there to give an answer on the spot.”

But the officials offered no analysis of how often westerners travel to Washington to meet with decision-makers, and at what cost. Similarly, they offered no cost analysis of flights by decision-makers to the West.

It is unclear what sort of congressional authorization is required to carry out the administration’s plan. When a BLM staffer raised the issue on Tuesday, Hammond replied that the department had already received the \$5 million needed to carry out the initial stage of the move in May.

According to a Senate Appropriations aide, longstanding spending law guidelines — including ones included in Interior’s current funding bill — require the department “to notify and seek

congressional approval of reorganization efforts . . . for certain actions, and do apply to this relocation effort."



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