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Coalition against Pendley: Local orgs join call for BLM leadership change

Maggie McGuire Moab Sun News
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Bureau of Land Management Deputy Director William Perry Pendley. [Courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management]

“The Bureau of Land Management is a big deal in Moab,” John Weisheit said. “We are surrounded by public lands; we live here because of public lands; our livelihood is tied up in public lands. We can’t afford to turn a blind eye.”

Weisheit, the executive director of Moab-based nonprofit Living Rivers, said that that’s why his organization signed on to a recent letter urging the resignation or removal of the current head of the BLM, Deputy Director William Perry Pendley.

A coalition of over 90 environmental and legal groups with ties to public lands sent the letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt on Dec. 30, saying that Pendley should be removed as “his actions betray BLM’s mission and demonstrate his lack of fitness to lead it.”



The letter also questions the legality of the Wyoming native's authority, pointing out that while he was appointed as the deputy director with temporary executive powers in July of 2019, he has exercised the powers of an acting department head since then.

The letter points out that that designation is intended for temporary use during periods of Presidential transition and "is improper now, nearly three full years into this Administration." For Pendley to take on the official title of chief at the BLM, he would have to be confirmed by the United States Senate.

Other signatories to the letter of protest include Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, the Western Watersheds Project and Moab-based Uranium Watch.

Pendley's tenure at the department has been controversial in the west, where he has long been known for campaigning against the federal control of public lands as an attorney and the president of the board of directors for the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a "non-profit, public interest law firm, focused on defending the constitution, protecting property rights, and advancing economic liberty," according to its website.

In September, Pendley released a 17-page recusal list, naming organizations and individuals he could have a conflict of interest with in his work at the BLM, as first reported by E&E News. The list included recusing himself many Utah-related issues, including barring him from interacting with Garfield, Kane and San Juan counties, whom he represented in active lawsuits over the shrinking of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

The BLM manages over 35,625 square miles of public land in Utah. That represents over 42% of the state's landmass.

Pendley's move to relocate the BLM headquarters to Grand Junction, Colorado, will also impact the region.

"Sec. David Bernhardt and I believe that the BLM's talent workforce belongs in the west, not in Washington D.C.," said Pendley in a BLM video about the move, calling it a "no-brainer" to move the agency's jobs closer to the majority of the lands they oversee.

However, many watchdog groups believe that the relocation will drive out senior BLM workers and undermine the agency's effectiveness in influencing policy. The protest letter seeking his removal states the coalition group's belief that the move will cause "longterm damage to the agency."



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Weisheit certainly believes this to be the case.

“Moving the center to Grand Junction is disruptive,” said Weisheit. “If you want to get rid of the status quo of the BLM, the employees who have been there for their entire careers: how better to evacuate the old guard?”

As an author, Pendley has written widely on his opposition to federal land management, including “The War on the West: Governmental Tyranny on America’s Great Frontier” and “Sagebrush Rebel: Reagan’s Battle with Environmental Extremists and Why It Matters Today.”

Pendley’s Twitter handle is also @SagebrushRebel, a reference to the high-profile opposition to federal management of public lands popular in Utah politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Pendley has declined to discuss his past advocacy or policy opinions, stating that “what I thought, what I wrote, what I did in the past is irrelevant,” when questioned at the Society of Environmental Journalists annual conference in October, as reported by the High Country News.

At the state level, the BLM announced on Jan. 2 that Utah State Director Edwin Roberson would retire immediately. Roberson had served in the position since 2016; Associate State Director Anita Bilbao will serve as acting state director until the post is permanently filled, the BLM reported in a press statement.



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