

Trump prepares to gut Federal land protections

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28 April 2017

President Trump issued an executive order Wednesday to review dozens of national monument designations, preparing the way for expanded drilling, mining and other development on large tracts of public land. The order directs the Department of Interior to assess two-dozen sites created since 1996, of more than 100,000 acres each, and potentially many other smaller sites.

Wednesday's directive is part of a broad effort to dismantle public health and environment-related restrictions on oil and gas producers, mining companies and other resource intensive industry. It adds to a March 28 executive order, which in addition to unraveling Obama's climate change regulations, orders a far-reaching review of all existing regulations that "burden" energy producers. Trump has also proposed a budget that would effectively paralyze the Federal government's chief environmental regulator and enforcer, the Environmental Protection Agency.

Through these orders and other antiregulatory initiatives underway by administration officials, Trump has sought in his first hundred days to rally support from a powerful section of the corporate elite, in this instance the energy industry. Removing regulatory impediments and geographical restrictions for drilling could greatly strengthen the profitability of the sector, which rapidly expanded during much of the Obama era. Despite recent cutbacks, production levels today remain well above those just a decade ago, nearly 80 and 50 percent higher than in 2005 for oil and natural gas respectively. However, as energy prices have fallen over the past few years, profits have suffered greatly.

In the text of the executive order and during his remarks Wednesday, Trump singled out Bears Ears National Monument for special consideration, claiming that its designation "should never have happened." The

2,000-square-mile site in Utah is a scenic natural formation of immense cultural significance to native tribes. It is also located in an area rich in natural resources, eyed for oil and gas development. The energy company EOG Resources has approval to drill nearby in the national monument.

Reflecting the dominance of oil and gas interests in the state, the political establishment in Utah has remained bitterly opposed to the monument status for Bears Ears, which was designated by Obama in the waning days of his term. Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, who penned an op-ed in the *Washington Post* earlier this week advocating the delisting of the site, along with his Senate colleague Mike Lee and governor Gary Herbert, all stood beside Trump at the signing ceremony. The executive order requires preliminary recommendations on Bears Ears after just 60 days, followed two months later by recommendations for the other national monuments.

Trump's order reaches back to 1996 to include Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, but also includes the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Pacific Ocean northwest of Hawaii, designated by George W Bush and enlarged by Obama. No president has ever completely abolished national monument status once created, and only rarely has a designated area been scaled back. Since the Antiquities Act was passed in 1903, 13 presidents have used it to create new national monuments. Conservationists have questioned the legal ability of a president to overturn these designations of his predecessors.

Nonetheless Trump vowed Wednesday to end the supposed "land grab" and "return control to the people" of federal lands. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke complained that the designations put the areas off limits

to “traditional uses” including “timber harvest, mining, oil and gas exploration.”

Notwithstanding this doublespeak, national parks and national monuments, which are afforded equal protection, are extremely popular across the country including in the West where the majority of the protected land is located. Visits to National Parks Service sites exceed 300 million annually. Recent polling indicates broad opposition to shrinking the amount of protected land, with just 9 percent of respondents indicating they favor such action.



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