



National Headquarters

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The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street Northwest
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) appreciated the invitation to participate in the Conservation Roundtable (Roundtable) earlier this month, and the opportunity to offer our views on your proposed reorganization of the Department of the Interior (Department). As a national organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of native species and their habitats, Defenders shares a common interest with the Department in the protection and proper management of America's public lands, waters and wildlife, and we are committed to working with you and all stakeholders in pursuit of this goal. During the Roundtable, you emphasized your intention to "pivot" to reorganization of the Department. For the reasons highlighted below, we believe your proposed reorganization is misguided. We urge you to instead pivot to addressing the major conservation challenges the Department and the nation now face.

The agencies, bureaus, and programs administered by the Department are profoundly important to conserving and properly managing the natural resources that define our nation and the values we share. Three Interior agencies, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), steward vast areas of public lands and waters and manage fish, wildlife and plant species that touch the lives of every American and are an indispensable part of our nation's natural heritage. Other bureaus bear vital responsibilities for water management, scientific programs, management of the nation's minerals, and government to government relationships with tribes.

We recognize that the operations and public responsiveness of federal departments and agencies can be improved. Defenders itself maintains a Center for Conservation Innovation whose explicit mission is to identify and develop innovative ways to implement the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and other conservation programs, and we have long supported efforts such as the Department's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives to coordinate conservation programs on a landscape level.

We are deeply concerned, however, that your intended reorganization of the Department may interfere with and distract the Department's bureaus and personnel from carrying out their essential missions. Indeed, if implemented as you described at the Roundtable, we believe the reorganization would be both imprudent and illegal.

First, the model of a unified military command is an inappropriate conceptual frame for coordination of the bureaus of the Department. Unlike the military services, which share an overarching mission of national defense, the Department's bureaus have distinct missions and responsibilities established by law. Those missions sometimes align, but sometimes diverge or even conflict – and that is by design. The public lands systems administered by FWS, NPS and BLM have distinct statutory missions, with management directed and constrained by the specific laws that govern each system. Energy development may be among the proper purposes of BLM's public lands, for example, but not the National Wildlife Refuge System or the National Park System. Moreover, some of the Department's bureaus, such as FWS and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), exercise regulatory authority over the activities of other agencies to ensure protection of paramount values such as wildlife resources and public safety.

The bureaus' actions carrying out their distinct responsibilities can properly be coordinated to achieve timely outcomes for things like permitting, but they cannot legally be subordinated to the control of a single unified regional "commander." Only the FWS, for example, has legal authority to manage the National Wildlife Refuge System or enforce the ESA; only the NPS has authority to manage the national parks; only BSEE can determine whether offshore drilling authorized by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management complies with appropriate environmental and safety requirements. No other office or administrator of any other bureau can direct decisions reserved by law to these agencies. The concept of a unified regional commander, drawn by rotation from the bureaus within the region, is thus both inappropriate and fundamentally unlawful.

Second, we are gravely concerned that reorganization of the Department at the scale and pace you contemplate will disrupt the essential functions of the Department's bureaus, undermine employee morale and sense of mission, and siphon away funding that the bureaus desperately need to carry out their missions. Your previous actions reassigning numerous Senior Executive Service managers to duties with which they were unfamiliar and sometime unqualified to manage has been widely condemned as disruptive to the Department's operations; key questions regarding the legality and procedural propriety of those abrupt transfers remain unanswered. Transferring thousands of Department staff to new duty stations will magnify the disruption of the Department's important work.

You expressed confidence at the Roundtable that the potential for employee distraction and impacts on staff morale would be alleviated by the imminent retirement of many of the Department's employees and their replacement with less experienced and less qualified staff. If that proves true, the Department will suffer enormous disruption from the loss of experienced and capable personnel who have the knowledge and professional relationships essential to

managing the Department's natural resources and maintaining its collaborative engagement with the states, tribes, property owners and the public.

Moreover, a reorganization at the scale you propose would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to implement at a time when the Department faces critical shortfalls in funding. You specifically identified the maintenance backlog faced by the NPS and other Department bureaus as your highest priority in coming years. The Department's budget is already failing to keep pace with critical needs, and the Trump administration's proposed budget would slash funding for the Department even further, to the point where bureaus would be unable to sustain their responsibilities for land management, resource protection, and protection of imperiled species. It cannot be responsible to propose a massive reorganization in the face of such dire budget needs. We think it highly unlikely that Congress will appropriate the significant sums you would need for this proposed reorganization, and it would be squarely illegal for the Department to attempt to reprogram funds provided for other functions in the Department's budget.

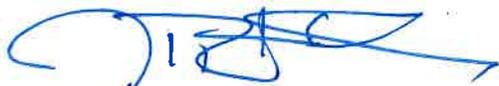
Ultimately, we believe your proposed reorganization of the Department is almost certain to fail and, is therefore a wasteful and disruptive distraction for you, the Department's other leadership and the Department's hard-working employees, who will face years of uncertainty about their professional careers and their personal lives. Besides the numerous concerns raised by the Department's senior executives, you have already experienced vehement opposition to changes in the Department's organization from western governors and have been compelled to respond by excluding BLM from your proposal. The purported benefits of a more unified approach to resource management that you advance as the purpose of your proposed reorganization are fatally undermined by the exclusion of BLM, which manages the nation's largest system of public lands and whose resource management decisions are of central importance throughout the West. The opposition of western governors to your proposed reorganization is a bellwether for the institutional resistance such a massive and disruptive proposal will face politically.

We respectfully urge you to rethink your commitment to this superficially attractive, but ultimately distracting and disruptive proposal for large scale reorganization of the Department. The nation's lands, waters, and wildlife will be better served by focusing your leadership on the critical conservation and natural resource management challenges the Department faces today. In preparation for the Roundtable, we provided to you *Defenders' Wildlife Conservation Agenda for the Next Administration*, which we had previously shared with you at the beginning of your term. It outlines our sense of the great challenges and opportunities that face the Department, including protecting and restoring endangered plants and wildlife, responsibly managing federal public lands and waters, investing in wildlife-responsible renewable energy development, maintaining our commitment to science-based conservation, and helping our youth and diverse and changing communities to connect with our public lands and wildlife conservation heritage.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these pressing conservation issues with you and your colleagues, either in future meetings of the Roundtable or in separate conversations. But pushing forward with this ill-considered proposal for massive reorganization of the Department will inevitably interfere with your and the Department's ability to engage with these critical challenges, to the detriment of the Department's conservation mission and to the nation.

Thank you again for inviting Defenders to the Roundtable and for haring your priorities and intentions. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure the Department's conservation mission is achieved as fully as possible in this administration. Our stewardship responsibility to future generations deserves no less.

Respectfully,



Jamie Rappaport Clark
President and CEO