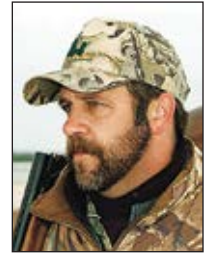


CHANGES ARE COMING

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Six months into the new administration, fish and wildlife professionals are scratching their heads about the future of conservation. We have seen a demonstrated decline in the importance of science—science advisors and science positions have been eliminated in a number of departments. Funding for science programs have been proposed for reduction or elimination. References to climate change on agency websites have been taken down or minimized. I am not saying that the sky is falling but that we watch the sky closely.

To Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's credit, he has pronounced strong opposition to the sale or transfer of our nation's public lands. These lands are part of a conservation heritage we all share and are instrumental in an outdoor recreation economy valued at \$887 billion and providing 7.6 million jobs for Americans—jobs that cannot be outsourced to foreign shores. He has expressed strong support for hunters and anglers and has promised us a voice in issues of importance to our community. His selection of state agency leaders to join the administration at the Fish and Wildlife Service are signals that he wants to improve the relationship between federal and state agencies. I applaud those actions.

However, recent decisions to radically reorganize the Department of Interior demand scrutiny from conservationists and the public alike. Although few details are available at this time, the plan

includes delineating 13 geographic management areas in which joint collaboration from all Interior bureaus and the Forest Service would presumably lead to more efficient and effective management of federal lands and their assets. There is no doubt that the management regions of Interior bureaus vary, that administrative economies of scale could be realized, and that better collaboration is needed between federal land management agencies. The reality is that each bureau operates under different missions defined by Congress and with different organizational cultures. Stitching the right people and their skill sets together in such a way to accomplish reorganization and agency missions is an extremely complex and complicated endeavor.

The question we should be posing is, "Are the appropriate people, with adequate expertise, making the best decisions and is now the time for change?" Presidential appointees who will head those agencies have not been nominated nor approved by the Senate and are not in place to lead the administration's reorganization plan. Prudent management principles would dictate career staff involvement in the planning process. These folks have years of practical experience and have good ideas about how to streamline administrative processes and improve efficiency. Further, when does the public get a chance to weigh in on this reorganization? A plan should be available for review in September, but changes have

already occurred that make me wonder if the Interior Department is already down a road that does not have an exit lane. Recent personnel changes and perhaps more in the works in the Senior Executive Service (SES), the "cream of the crop" of federal employees, indicate that some decisions have already been made. These changes are legal and understood by those serving in the SES; however, they will have a lasting and chilling impact on other career employees who will be tasked with making a reorganization work. Leadership requires a clear vision and communication of actions necessary to be successful. Right now, career employees are leaderless and unsure what decisions need to be made and what actions to take.

The president's budget request includes the reduction of 4,000 employees and \$1.6 billion from the currently enacted Interior budget. This administration, as all others in the past, must make difficult decisions in order to balance budgets and reduce the federal deficit. The aim to have Interior "front-line focused" and to reduce the bureaucracy in major Washington, D.C., and Denver Interior offices are admirable goals. Can the current system successfully withstand the proposed changes, protect public assets, and the employees who manage those assets in trust for the American public? I am not a proponent of the status quo, but there is a reason the current department is structured the way it is. Successful reorganization can only be

accomplished through careful thought, experience, and engagement. I hope those characteristics accompany efforts to transform the management of about 28 percent of the lands in the United States.

As we often hear from Congress, slow, deliberative decision-making is the hallmark of good legislation. All of us who treasure the public lands managed by the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service must be ever vigilant that any reorganization improves the current structure and function of these land management agencies. The initial indications are that decisions have been made and a plan is in operation prior to having agency leadership in place and employee input that would benefit the plan's formulation. As Boone and Crockett Club members, we have an extensive stake in this game, an obligation to engage, and the knowledge and experience to help or resist the administration in its efforts to change federal public land management. ■