

INTERIOR

Zinke defends reorganization, budget to skeptical senators

Kellie Lunney, E&E News reporter

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke testified this morning before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee. Senate Appropriations Committee

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke today defended his decision to reassign dozens of senior executives as part of a major departmentwide reorganization that is just getting underway.

The Senior Executive Service "by definition" gets moved around, Zinke said, responding to concerns raised by Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) during testimony before the Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee.

Udall, the panel's ranking member, said lawmakers have been "left in the dark" about the department's reorganization plans, which he believes are moving too quickly.

The reassignments are "not unprecedented," Zinke asserted, adding that the department is shifting people to jobs where their skills are better-suited, or moving them out of headquarters into the field, where there is greater need.

"The front line is short of people," Zinke said. "Headquarters and management seem just fine."

Agencies by statute can reassign senior executives, provided the agencies comply with the proper notification process. Senior executives know when they enter the Senior Executive Service that they are subject to involuntary reassignments.

Udall asked for a list of affected senior executives, which Zinke said he would provide once they make a decision to either accept the reassignment or resign, citing privacy rules. "After they make the choice, I will be glad to give you the list, but until that time I will honor their list," Zinke said.

In his written testimony, Zinke said he would pursue reducing the department workforce by 4,000 full-time jobs through a mix of attrition, separation incentives and reassignments, to meet the recommendations of the fiscal 2018 budget request. During a U.S. Chamber of Commerce event yesterday, the former Montana congressman said Interior is about to enter "probably the greatest reorganization" in its history, moving toward a new system with 13 "joint management areas" that he has detailed in recent weeks ([***E&E News PM***](#), June 20).

"You'll see the first blush of it coming out in about 60 days or so," Zinke said yesterday. "The president is supportive of it, he's been very supportive of it, and we're going to go forward and reorganize."

Udall also raised specific concerns over reports that the Bureau of Land Management is eyeing a reduction of 1,000 positions through attrition and separation incentives, such as buyouts or early retirement offers. Acting BLM Director Mike Nedd sent a June 16 email to employees, [***posted online***](#) by **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**, that outlines the agency's budget challenges in light of the administration's \$11.7 billion proposal for the department in fiscal 2018, a 13 percent cut from 2017 enacted levels, depending on the budget numbers cited.

"While the fiscal 2018 budget is not final, we must heed the staffing levels that it calls for," Nedd wrote. "For our agency, this could mean 1,000 fewer full-time equivalent employees across the nation. I understand this may create anxiety among some staff as we try to plan for the future of our agency, ourselves, and our families. Your leadership team is working to minimize the impact to our workforce while reviewing our priority work to determine what can be accomplished with the resources available."

The White House is recommending \$1.1 billion for BLM in fiscal 2018, a decrease of \$180.5 million below the 2017 enacted level.

Udall also expressed the need to consult with Indian tribes over any reorganization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Zinke said the department should have the plan to reorganize BIA "within 90 days" and that the tribes will be a part of it, adding that not "every part of Interior" will be affected as much as others by reorganization.

"There's no chance that Interior is going to reorganize BIA without sitting down with the tribes, and Congress," said Zinke.

Hard choices

In his second of three appearances this week before congressional committees, Zinke reiterated today to lawmakers that the budget proposal is the result of tough decisions, but that it's what a "balanced budget" should look like.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) disagreed.

"This is not a balanced budget," said Alexander, adding that mandatory spending — programs like Social Security and Medicare — is the part of the \$2.7 trillion budget that is "out of control." Alexander said until that changes, funding for things like national parks and the National Institutes of Health "will be squeezed into nothing."

For instance, the proposed Trump budget also would scale back new federal land acquisition and support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund — cuts that have infuriated public land and conservation advocates. The omnibus spending deal that lawmakers agreed to earlier this year provided \$400 million for LWCF in fiscal 2017, while the Trump fiscal 2018 budget request seeks to reduce funding for LWCF to \$64 million.

Republican and Democratic appropriators at today's hearing were not happy about the proposed 85 percent cut to LWCF.

"I know you are for [support] LWCF," said Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.). "This budget does not indicate you are for it." Zinke reiterated that new federal land acquisition is not a priority right now, given the nearly \$12 billion maintenance backlog at the National Park Service.

"The budget funds core tasks and treaty obligations, but not much more," Zinke acknowledged, pledging to work with lawmakers on their priorities. "It's a starting point."

Interior Appropriations Subcommittee Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) made it clear that she wasn't in favor of wholesale cuts to certain programs just to "hit a budget number."

Some of the proposed cuts she said were "troubling" included reductions to programs that convey land titles to tribes, to the payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) program and to BIA. She did praise other aspects of the proposed budget, including fully funding fire suppression activities at the 10-year average.

BLM methane rule

Several lawmakers, including Tester, Udall and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), asked Zinke whether he would uphold the Obama-era rule regulating oil and gas flaring on public lands.

Zinke reiterated what he told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee yesterday: He has suspended the rule, but he intends to follow the law, referring to the Administrative Procedure Act, which governs the way agencies propose and establish regulations ([Greenwire](#), June 20). Last month, the Senate voted down a resolution that would have overturned the methane rule.

"As a former Navy officer and congressman, I do follow the law," he told the panel.

However, he also said that he "intends to rewrite the rule."

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E&E News
122 C Street NW 7th Floor Washington, DC 20001
Phone: 202-628-6500 Fax: 202-737-5299
www.eenews.net

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