

## **BLM calls off public meetings amid Trump's monument review**

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While the Trump administration makes moves to scrutinize and potentially scale down or undo some national monuments, the top brass at the U.S. Department of the Interior has canceled upcoming advisory meetings in Taos and across the country that are some of the few institutionalized ways of gauging public opinions about public lands.

Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke signaled last week that the department, which includes the Bureau of Land Management and National Parks Service, would be reviewing the mission and function of more than 200 boards and committees.

Among those 200 boards is the Farmington Resource Advisory Council, which is responsible for much of Northern New Mexico, from the Arizona to Oklahoma borders, including Taos. There are 38 advisory councils across the western portion of the United States.

Carmen Acosta Johnson, a member of the Farmington council, told *The Taos News* in a Wednesday (May 17) interview that the councils are “permanent, established and functioning conduits for public discussion in the management of these huge areas of public land.”

While members of the public have other ways of making their opinions known to the BLM — from written responses in the *Federal Register* to simply walking into the BLM office — advisory councils are unique as one of the few avenues for the BLM to hear directly from the people impacted by its decisions.

Advisory councils are required by federal law and consist of about 10 members representing a mix of sometimes opposing interests, such as conservationists, ranchers, outdoor recreationists, government officials, tribal officials and academics. They are meant to meet two to four times a year. As with other open meetings, anyone can share their opinions during the council meetings.

One such gathering of the Farmington council was scheduled to convene June 6-7 in Taos. That meeting's been postponed.

The impacts of the review reach far beyond Taos County.

Advisory council meetings in Albuquerque, Pecos and Las Cruces were postponed. Colorado's four advisory councils are suspended. Wyoming's single council also had a meeting put off. Furthermore, a public meeting about Nevada's Gold Butte National Monument slated for this month was canceled.

Johnson is calling on the interior secretary to rescind his suspension and for all advisory councils to hold emergency meetings immediately.

The Department of the Interior's stated rationale for the review is public trust and input.

“Secretary [Ryan Zinke] is committed to restoring trust in the department's decision-making and that begins with institutionalizing state and local input and ongoing collaboration, particularly in communities surrounding public lands. To maximize feedback from these boards and ensure their

compliance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act and the president's recent executive orders, the department is currently reviewing the charter and charge of each ... advisory committee. This review process necessitates the temporary postponement of advisory committee meetings,' Heather Swift, a spokesperson for the department, wrote in a May 15 email.

Volunteer advisory councils do have their issues. For example, it's occasionally hard to fill the positions of the Farmington branch and internal communications can slip through the cracks.

But Zinke's justification has provoked the ire of some advocates for public lands.

Johnson called the move a "conflicting message" because the administration's calls for public input "require the [councils] to meet.'

"The councils need to meet now more than ever," she said.

"The Trump administration has spoken on multiple occasions about how important public input is. So it's nonsensical that they cancel meetings while looking at making significant changes to the ways public lands are managed," said Greg Zimmerman, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities, a nonpartisan public lands policy group.

New Mexico's senators similarly slammed the move. U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich wrote in a letter to Zinke: "It is critical that local voices, including [advisory councils], have the opportunity to provide input and take part in the process all times, not just when those local voices align with the administration or a large special interest,."

The review of public councils coincides with the review of national monuments created in the last 20 years, including the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument that was designated in 2013 by former President Barack Obama.

Part of the stated objective of the monument review is to determine if the public was adequately consulted prior to the monuments' creation under the Antiquities Act.

"The timing raises a lot of questions about why they're doing it," said Zimmerman. "I would certainly suggest this administration is trying to avoid public input."

The Department of Interior did not respond to multiple requests from *The Taos News* for more information.

As far as what's next for the councils, Zimmerman posits that because they are required by the 1976 Federal Land Policy Management Act, the executive branch could "tilt the scale of the folks who sit on them, [eliminating] the breadth and depth of members they currently have."

The agenda for the canceled June meeting in Taos was never published, but Taos County's monument would undoubtedly have been a major topic given Taos' proactive, consistent and vocal support for public lands since Trump took office.

Even though advisory meetings were canceled, local BLM managers are still accepting applications for the four open positions on the Farmington council.



**A full moon rises over Ute Mountain, which is located at the northern end of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke has begun a review of all the U.S. Department of the Interior's advisory councils, including the group of citizens charged with advising the Bureau of Land Management on issues in Northern New Mexico. Public lands advocates question the timing of the review and suggest it's a way to avoid public input at a critical moment of federal decision-making.**

**Photo by Katharine Egli**

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