https://insideclimatenews.org/news/22022021/whats-on-interiors-to-do-list-a-full-plate-of-public-lands-issues-and-trump-rollbacks-for-deb-haaland/

# What's On Interior's To-Do List? A Full Plate of Public Lands Issues—and Trump Rollbacks—for Deb Haaland

## The Interior nominee would be the first Native American cabinet secretary if she wins Senate confirmation following hearings that begin Tuesday.

By Judy Fahys
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U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM), President-elect Joe Biden's choice for Interior Secretary, at the U.S. Capitol in January 2019. Credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Public lands are set to play a pivotal role in the Biden administration's ambitious climate change agenda. The national parks, wildlife refuges and national recreation areas overseen by the U.S. Department of the Interior have been little-appreciated as climate solutions, even though they're crucial sinks for greenhouse gas emissions. But Interior lands are also part of the nation's climate problem, since they hold vast reserves of fossil fuels that, when extracted and burned, generate climate pollution.

President Joe Biden began dismantling some pro-drilling policies within hours of being sworn in, but applying a climate-action mindset to day-to-day decisions, not only at Interior but throughout the federal government, will take much longer and could prove much harder. With public lands accounting for nearly one-quarter of the nation's climate pollution, the new administration's success—and the durability of its agenda—depends partly on clearing away obstacles from the Trump era.

“My hope is that they can walk and chew gum at the same time,” said Jesse Prentice-Dunn, policy director at the Colorado-based Center for Western Priorities, commenting on the short-term challenge of undoing the Trump pro-development agenda and the longer-term challenge of advancing the new administration’s pro-climate agenda.

A 60-day pause on major Interior Department actions remains in place for another month, following a series of executive orders on climate change and public lands that Biden signed in his first week in office. During that time, officials will be mulling a to-do list for Interior that probably looks something like this:

## Confirmation of U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland to Lead the Department

Biden nominated Haaland, a New Mexico Democratic congresswoman, to become the nation’s first-ever cabinet secretary with Indigenous roots, a historic move reflecting Biden’s mandate to correct environmental and racial offenses of the past. But wrangling the sprawling agency with 70,000 employees won’t be easy. With oversight of 413 million acres of federal land and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral rights, Interior has diverse—and often contradictory—roles.

A Laguna Pueblo tribal citizen and 35th-generation New Mexican, Haaland faces the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee at her confirmation hearing Tuesday. If senators confirm her, she immediately faces daunting challenges, such as managing the deepening western drought and addressing a $20 billion deferred maintenance backlog on public lands, including 423 units managed by the National Park Service.

Indigenous people lobbied Biden to nominate Haaland, and they’re thrilled with the prospect of improving federal relations with the nation’s 574 federally recognized tribes. At one time the department, which includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs among its 11 agencies, endeavored to “civilize or exterminate” Indigenous people. Haaland, who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline before becoming one of the first two Native American women to serve in Congress, acknowledged the challenge ahead in her nomination acceptance speech: “I’ll be fierce for all of us, for our planet and all of our protected land.”

Rep. Don Young, an Alaska Republican who’s worked with Haaland on the House Natural Resources Committee and calls her a “consensus builder,” is scheduled to introduce her to the Senate committee, alongside her New Mexico Democratic colleague, Sen. Martin Heinrich. But her confirmation seems likely to be politically charged. Sen. Steve Daines (R-Mont.) has

threatened to block Haaland's confirmation over her "radical views," such as opposing the Keystone XL pipeline, supporting the Green New Deal and backing the Biden administration's temporary oil and gas moratorium on public lands. So have Energy and Natural Resources Committee's top Republican, John Barrasso of Wyoming and other GOP senators, who describe her as an enemy to energy production on federal lands and jobs. Meanwhile, Haaland told HuffPost Thursday that it's time for the world to listen to Indigenous people when it comes to climate change and the environment. "Whoever becomes secretary has an opportunity to combat climate change, to take this 25 percent [of the nation's] carbon that our public lands are emitting right now and eliminate that." Biden needs 51 votes in the Senate to confirm Haaland, so as long as Democrats hold together, she should overcome GOP opposition.

## Adding Climate Considerations to a Public Lands Leasing Program Previously Based on 'Energy Dominance'

In his first week as president, Biden announced a pause in new oil and gas leasing on federal lands and in offshore waters pending a comprehensive review of the program and its climate impacts. This after the Trump administration used its final weeks to speed leasing of 552,000 acres of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for energy development and to allow mining on 9.7 million acres in western Alaska, including an area between the National Petroleum Reserve and the Arctic Ocean. Both moves could prove difficult to reverse in court, in Congress or administratively. And the day before the U.S. Capitol insurrection, the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management approved a controversial project that allows drilling on 1.5 million acres in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana.

Biden's Interior Department will have to decide how to undo a measure that scaled back an Obama-era increase in the royalties that oil, gas and coal companies pay the federal government. Some countermoves have been simpler, like canceling the permit for the 1,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline by executive order within hours of taking office. But Jeremy Nichols, climate and energy director for WildEarth Guardians said shifting the overall course will be like trying to turn around a runaway freighter. "What it's going to take is more than just issuing edicts and orders and directives," he said. "It's going to take the Interior Department leadership, actually interacting with the people in the entire department who implement the policy and building a new level of trust and buy-in on this cultural shift."

## Restoring Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments

By presidential proclamation, Trump carved out an area larger than the state of Delaware from the two national monuments in southern Utah. A legal fight to stop those reductions began the day they were announced in 2017, but the BLM fast-tracked new master management plans before Biden took office. New political leadership in the region has brought new support not just for restoring the old boundaries, but for expanding them even beyond the original proposal of the five tribes behind Bears Ears. It will be key to restore the co-management role for Indigenous people that Obama included in the proclamation creating the monument but that Trump had scrapped. "We support Bears Ears, and we also deserve a voice," said a recent Salt Lake Tribune op-ed by San Juan County, Utah Commissioners Kenneth Maryboy and Willie Grayeyes, both members of the Navajo Nation, who won seats on the local governing council that vigorously fought the original monument's creation.

Sarah Bauman, executive director of the Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, a conservation-advocacy organization dedicated to the 25-year-old "science" monument west of Bears Ears, pointed out that restoring the Grand Staircase boundaries dovetails with past congressional action safeguarding the coal-rich area from mining, and it aligns with the Biden administration's conservation plans. Biden ordered a review of the monument reductions on Inauguration Day, and the lawsuits challenging the legality of Trump's boundary reductions are frozen for at least two more weeks. Bauman remains optimistic, noting that Biden administration officials "recognize the role public lands play in climate change mitigation and adaptation."

## Cleaning Up After William Perry Pendley at the Bureau of Land Management

The courts are still considering cases involving the leadership of this right-wing lawyer, who spent much of his career attacking the agency he would lead for Trump for more than a year as its "acting" director. The cases are significant beyond Interior because they challenge the previous administration's broad use of temporary appointees throughout the federal government. Pendley is accused of guiding key decisions in land-use master plans that determine where

acreage will be devoted to drilling, recreation or protecting habitat for decades—many of which cleared the way for oil and gas mining at the expense of conservation. His critics have challenged Pendley's actions on more than 50 issues, from energy development to wild horses. At the top of that list of disputed actions is leasing millions of acres of public lands to drilling, including areas of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the National Petroleum Reserve that Indigenous communities and environmentalists had long fought to protect from such activities. What the Biden administration plans to do about the dozens of Pendley decisions that environmental groups contend are "illegal" remains unknown.

One of Pendley's biggest and most controversial initiatives at the BLM was relocating the agency's headquarters from Washington to Grand Junction, Colorado, a move that resulted in 87 percent of affected staffers leaving the agency, taking with them hundreds of years of expertise. The BLM communications office said that the agency is planning a "deliberative and thoughtful process" to review the headquarters move with input from career staff, the tribes and members of Congress.

“Those [BLM leaders] should be at the table in D.C. where the decisions are being made and the budget’s being approved,” said Prentice-Dunn of the Center for Western Priorities. “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu, and those folks right now are on the menu.”

## Restoring Endangered Species Act and Habitat Protections

The Trump administration made several broad moves to rework the nation’s foundational species protection laws. Unwinding them is expected to be tough for the Biden administration but goes hand-in-hand with preserving healthy landscapes that mitigate greenhouse gases. The Trump administration required financial considerations to be factored into decisions involving imperiled species, narrowed the definition of “critical habitat” for protecting species and redefined when species can be added or removed from the endangered species list—all rollbacks that harmed sensitive species while benefiting developers and the energy industry.

The most sweeping move eased sage grouse protections over 10 million acres across the West to facilitate oil and gas development, and populations of the bird continued to decline until a court overturned the rollbacks earlier this month. The Biden administration has put the brakes on Trump’s scaling back of protections for migratory birds, the northern spotted owl, the gray wolf, desert tortoises, wolverines, monarch butterflies and other species. And while the threatened or endangered list expanded by 25 during the Trump administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now has a backlog of more than 500 requests to decide on species protections, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

“It’s not that they’re starting from scratch,” said Noah Greenwald, the center’s director of endangered species. “It’s that the agencies that implement those laws are beaten down…discouraged from implementing and enforcing them [and] underfunded. Putting policies in place that really implement those laws in an effective way—that is something that will take a couple of years.”

## Restoring a Culture that Values Science-based Decisions

Under Biden, leaders of the U.S. Geological Survey have already rescinded a directive issued in the Trump administration’s final days that called for inclusion of less-troubling impact scenarios in the agency’s climate projections. Agency leaders seemed to want to underscore that the new USGS has dramatically different priorities. In an email to Inside Climate News, the agency described a routine in which, “we regularly review the state of knowledge of climate science, and develop and maintain best practices for using global climate models. We also provide interpretations of potential impacts that can be used for practical planning and policymaking purposes.” That ethic underpins the 30-by-30 executive order Biden signed on his first day in

office, which is based on the idea of protecting 30 percent of the nation's land and waters by 2030 to fight climate change and biodiversity loss. Joro Walker, an attorney with Western Resource Advocates, recognizes that will be tough, since USGS estimates that just 12 percent of U.S. lands and 23 percent of U.S. oceans are strongly protected now. "Plainly there's a lot to be done," Walker said. "When you think about addressing climate change, and the catastrophic outcomes that will occur if we don't, then you need to think boldly."

Nichols of WildEarth Guardians said Interior sorely needs change, and that begins with leadership committed to clearing away old fossil-fuel thinking. "Deb Haaland is gonna make absolutely clear that the resources and lands that the Interior Department manages from here on out, are going to be put to work for the climate and and for justice." Once confirmed, he predicted, Haaland will get to work quickly on those priorities.