

Proposed BLM planning rule faces criticism in Senate

June 21, 2016

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Director, Neil Kornze, faced tough questions during a Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee hearing this June, where committee members were able to question him about the agency's new Planning 2.0 rule.

The rule is the first attempt in 30 years to update and modernize how the BLM handles the 160 resource management plans (RMPs) that guide land-use activities on the agency's 245 million acres.

Committee members were opposed to BLM's approach to Landscape Scale Planning, which would give the agency jurisdiction over connected geographical regions with similar environmental characteristics that span the agency's administrative boundaries. Chairman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) argued that RMPs should not cross state lines because landscape-scale resource issues, such as the sage grouse initiative, may not apply to all states. Sen. Cory Gardner (R-CO) also expressed concern that the approach prioritizes single-use land plans over multiple-use land plans, which unfairly impacts those using land for a variety of purposes, such as farmers and the energy industry.

In contrast, outdoor recreation groups, such as Trout Unlimited and the National Wildlife Federation, have hailed the proposed change, citing that resources such as fish and wildlife do not follow arbitrary lines on a map.

Committee members were also particularly concerned with how the rule would adjust the minimum public comment periods for draft RMPs and environmental impact statements (EISs). The comment period for draft RMPs, which are typically thousands of pages long, would decrease from 90 days to 60 days; the comment period for draft EISs would decrease from 90 days to 45 days. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) argued that shortened comment periods would hinder participation from local leaders and governmental and tribal officials.

Kornze defended the rule, stating that the move will "establish more meaningful opportunities for governments and the public to be involved earlier in the process." In drafting the rule, the BLM held public meetings for two years and accepted comments from over 6,000 local governments, groups, and individuals. However, Kornze agreed that the rule needs additional attention to address the concerns voiced by committee members.

Sources: Bureau of Land Management, E&E Daily, Murkowski.senate.gov, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
