

Natural Resources Committee investigates rollback of national monument protections

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The House Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on the rollbacks of national monument protections on March 13. The rollbacks were announced in December 2017, when President Donald Trump delivered two presidential proclamations in December to downsize national monuments on over 2 million acres of land in Utah. The proclamations authorizing the downscaling of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments followed a comprehensive review of 27 national monuments for potential reduction or elimination, as required by an executive order issued by President Trump in April 2017. The rollbacks have since been widely debated: some Utah officials have praised the move toward state instead of federal control, while tribal and environmental groups have expressed concern over the continued preservation of lands with deep historical, environmental, and cultural significance. President Trump justified his order by saying that past administrations have overreached their authority in using the Antiquities Act to set aside excessively large areas for protection as national monuments. Senator Mike Lee (R-UT), Congressman Rob Bishop (R-UT-1), and other Utah legislators have supported President Trump's decision, indicating a preference against federal control of lands within their state.

Committee Chairman Raul Grijalva (D-AZ-3) has been a critic of the rollbacks since they were announced, stating that the monument reductions are "the largest public lands rollback in modern American history." The hearing provided a forum in which Native American tribe leaders could voice concerns over the increased vulnerability of sacred lands as a result of the rollbacks, notably the possibility of extractive industries disturbing sites in formerly protected areas. Clark Tenakhongva, vice chairman of the Hopi Tribe, explained how lands retain a spiritual importance to their people even after the tribe has left the area. Conservation Lands Foundation Executive Director Brian Sybert underscored the "extraordinary value these lands hold for Native American communities and all Americans," arguing that the rollbacks constituted "nothing more than political score settling."

The rollbacks have also been criticized by paleontological groups, who have noted the value of protecting these lands both above and below the surface due to the richness of both relatively pristine wildlife habitat and exceptional fossil localities.

On March 12, Bishop introduced the National Monument Creation and Protection Act (CAP Act) (H.R. 1664), a bill to reform the original Antiquities Act and impose limits on the president's power to change national monuments, due in part to concerns over future expansions of federally protected lands. Bishop has also invited former presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and George W. Bush to appear before the committee to clarify the usage of the Antiquities Act throughout their presidencies.

Sources: American Association for the Advancement of Science; Library of Congress; The National Science Foundation; The Washington Post; The White House; U.S. House, Committee on Natural Resources.
