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House Attempts to Block Proposed Reorganization and Relocation of the U.S. Geological Survey

GSA Speaking of Geoscience

By Laura Szymanski, GSA Science Policy Fellow

On 25 June 2019, the House passed the fiscal year (FY) 2020 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill as part of a five-bill minibuss, H.R. 3055. The bill would increase funding for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) over FY2019 levels and the Administration's budget request. The bill also includes report language that prohibits the proposed reorganization and blocks an attempt to relocate staff of the USGS away from the Washington, D.C. area.

On 13 March 2017, President Trump issued an executive order directing the head of each federal agency to submit reorganization plans or eliminate agencies to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. In response to this order, then Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, proposed a reorganization plan where the Department of Interior's (DOI's) 49 regional offices would be consolidated into 12 unified regions. Under Zinke, proposed reorganization plans expanded to include a relocation of some personnel of the USGS as well. Current Secretary of the Interior, David Bernhardt, confirmed 11 April 2019 following the resignation of Zinke, stated his support for the reorganization and relocation plans at the 15 May 2019 House Natural Resources Committee hearing, *The U.S. DOI Budget and Policy Priorities for FY 2020*.

Map of the Department of Interior's (DOI's) proposed 12 unified regions; doi.gov

The Administration's FY2020 budget request for the USGS was \$983.5 million, with \$6.2 million for the USGS to implement the reorganization and move some headquarters functions and 60 personnel to Lakewood, Colorado. Additionally, the budget request consolidates the USGS's 7 Mission Areas to 5 by eliminating the Land Resources and Environmental Health Mission Areas. Specifically, programs that are not eliminated within the Land Resources Mission Area would be continued within the restructured Ecosystems and Core Science Systems Mission Areas and the few remaining Environmental Health Mission Area programs into the restructured Ecosystems and Water Resources Mission Areas.

At a 30 April 2019, House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing: *No Road Map, No Destination, No Justification: The Implementation and Impacts of the Reorganization of the Department of the Interior*, committee members discussed the merits of this proposed reorganization, including the relocation of some headquarter elements of the USGS to the Western U.S. Mr. Scott Cameron, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget, U.S. DOI, testified that the relocation of key staff within the USGS to the west would bring operations and staff closer to the public they interact with most frequently and would result in long-term cost savings as a result of cheaper rental costs and plane rides, due to a switch to more 1- hour flights rather than 4-hour flights. Rep. Cox (D-CA) voiced concerns over the reorganization as there has not been a release of a plan, justification, or a cost-benefit analysis and Rep. Grijalva (D-AZ) suggested this was a move to fundamentally weaken the agency by moving away key senior staff from Congress to minimize contact with authorizers and appropriators.

House appropriators also had concerns and their bill's report language prohibits the proposed reorganization and relocation of key staff of the USGS. The report states, "The Committee does not approve the budget restructure proposed in the budget request because it reduces program and funding transparency. All fixed costs outlined in the budget request are provided, but none of the requested program changes are agreed to unless specifically addressed below" and later continues by stating, "The recommendation does not provide the \$6,200,000 requested for the Department-wide reorganization. The Committee believes the Survey has not presented strong foundational analysis or a compelling argument to support establishing a headquarters presence in the West. A relocation of the magnitude proposed in the budget request would dramatically change the organization, have significant financial costs, and impact the Survey's effectiveness and strategic national-level partnerships with Federal agencies,

States, scientific organizations, and stakeholders. The Survey should not commit federal funds or personnel time to this relocation but instead focus its efforts on ensuring Survey operations are open and transparent, the quality and objectivity of Survey science is maintained, and investments are leveraged. The Committee expects administration and management services and information services to continue without reductions that would delay hiring, contracting, accounting functions, and other activities that support the missions of the Survey.”

The bill now awaits action by the Senate.

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