



## Documents show extent of Interior plan to decentralize BLM

By Rebecca Beitch and Miranda Green | 09/09/19



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Included in the Department of Interior's decision to decentralize the Washington office that manages the nation's public lands is a plan to move congressional affairs staff 2,600 miles away to Reno, Nevada.

The agency [announced in July](#) that it would be moving about 300 D.C.-based Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees out West, but internal Interior Department documents shared with The Hill on Monday show the extent to which roles traditionally placed in the nation's capital are being shotgunned across the country.

The July 15 documents include a position-by-position breakdown of Interior's unprecedented plans for BLM's reorganization — information that has yet to be shared with employees who are still waiting to hear where they must relocate.

A senior policy analyst, several legislative affairs specialists and a public affairs specialist are among the positions of note shown in the documents to be heading to Reno.

Interior had [previously said](#) legislative staff would remain in Washington.

The Reno office has traditionally been the main office for BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program and other grazing initiatives in the Great Basin.

"Why would you put your legislative affairs staff in Reno, Nevada, when Congress, who they work with, is in Washington, D.C.?" asked Steve Ellis, who served as the deputy director for operations at BLM, the highest career-level position at the agency, before retiring in 2016.

"Legislative affairs is constantly interacting with Congress and congressional staff. That's their job. So, yeah, that sounds like a great place for them to be," Ellis said sarcastically.

It's not clear whether the department has revised its plans since the documents were created. The agency did not return a request for comment on its plans for staffers.

Several lawmakers have protested BLM's slated move, saying many of the staffers are needed in Washington. The revelations come as House Democrats [have a hearing scheduled](#) to examine the move Tuesday morning.

A job description for the "Legislative Affairs Deputy Division Chief," who is slated to move to Reno, says the position "represent[s] the Bureau's mission, policies and activities to members of Congress."

A description for the "Senior Policy Analyst," who is also headed to Reno, says the role "serves as the division's senior analyst and regulatory lead. Leads regulatory writing teams. Drafts and analyzes various policy documents."

The document also shows an international affairs specialist headed to Salt Lake City.

"Locating the position to Utah would certainly be a challenge, but the bigger problem is moving the entire BLM out West," said Celia Boddington, who served as the assistant director for communications until she retired earlier this year and regularly worked with the international affairs staffer during her career.

"International delegations come to Washington, D.C., with great frequency; it is unlikely that they would go to either Grand Junction or wherever the specialist was located in the Western states. That's a lost opportunity for the BLM to share its expertise on land management and particularly energy development."

Each position has traditionally been placed in D.C. to give staffers the ability to easily converse with lawmakers and high-level staff at both BLM and Interior.

But high-level BLM staff will also be far removed from D.C., as 29 top career staffers will move to a new headquarters in [Grand Junction, Colo.](#) Just 61 of the agency's 10,000 employees will remain in Washington, the agency said in July.

The document also shows that 44 positions now based in D.C. will no longer be considered "Washington Office" jobs. Those policy-related roles will instead be transitioned to deal with state- and local-level issues.

Interior said BLM's relocation is designed to bring staff closer to the public lands they manage, the majority of which are located in Western states.

But the plan has resulted in numerous clashes.

Congress and Interior have already [butted heads](#) over whether lawmakers have given their approval for the move. Interior responded to the complaints from [two lawmakers](#) by saying [it may not move any BLM employees](#) to their states.

Numerous [BLM retirees](#) have spoken out against the move, calling it a way to “functionally dismantle” the agency.

“It will be very difficult for the headquarters staff dispersed across the West to have daily, informal interactions with their counterparts in other national organizations who will remain in the Washington, DC area,” Ellis said.

“My concern is that over time, the BLM's voice will be lost in the national conversations about natural resource management. A loss that will likely result in national policies that are less balanced, and potentially smaller budgets for the public lands,” he added.