

Trump's land boss pledges to steer clear of ex-clients

By MATTHEW BROWN and BRADY McCOMBS | September 26, 2019

BILLINGS (AP) — The Trump administration's top steward of public lands has recused himself from work involving dozens of former clients following conflict of interest allegations from Democratic lawmakers and environmental advocates, federal officials disclosed Wednesday.

Acting Bureau of Land Management Director William "Perry" Pendley is a former property rights attorney who has argued for selling off public lands and railed against what he has labelled the "tyranny" of the federal government.

Pendley said in a Wednesday email to his staff obtained by The Associated Press that he wanted to set an example for the agency's 9,000 employees by avoiding the potential conflicts.

He agreed not to participate in matters involving 57 entities and individuals — from farming and mining organizations to an energy company seeking to drill on land adjacent to Glacier National Park, according to documents released by officials.

"I understand that preserving a culture of ethical compliance within the BLM begins with me," Pendley wrote. "I have also established a rigorous screening process to ensure that I will remain in full compliance."

The recusals are generally effective for two years and retroactive to the date of his mid-July appointment.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Jon Tester of Montana has sharply criticized Pendley's past calls to sell off public lands and called his appointment an end-run around the Senate because no confirmation hearings were held.

Tester said in a statement that Pendley's recusal from decisions related to a disputed energy lease in Montana was a "positive step," but more answers were needed about his record. Others in Congress have voiced similar concerns.

"The fact remains that he has repeatedly advocated for selling off our public lands to the highest bidder, which should have disqualified him outright from leading the BLM," Tester said.

The BLM leader said last month that his longtime advocacy for selling public lands was irrelevant because his boss, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, opposes the wholesale sale of public lands.

The Trump administration already has moved to weaken protections for public lands, including easing restrictions on oil and gas exploration. BLM officials last week said the

agency was moving its headquarters from Washington to an office building in Colorado that also houses oil and gas organizations, drawing criticism from environmental groups.

Among Pendley's past clients when he ran the conservative Mountain States Legal Foundation was Solenex LLC, a Louisiana-based energy company that has been seeking to drill in the remote and mountainous Badger-Two Medicine area of northwestern Montana.

The Badger-Two-Medicine area is considered sacred to the Blackfoot tribes of the U.S. and Canada, and Solenex is fighting in court against the Interior Department's attempts to cancel an energy lease that the company has held for decades.

Tribal officials still hope to work with the Trump administration on the issue, but Pendley's recusals do not eliminate their apprehensions, said John Murray, historic preservation officer for Montana's Blackfeet Nation. "He was 100 percent on the other side of the table," Murray said. "These guys do all kinds of lobbying and meeting and all this stuff behind closed doors."

The lengthy recusal list touches on some of the BLM's major oversight responsibilities, naming organizations such as the National Mining Association and several state farm bureaus. Agency spokesman Jeff Krauss said that would not prevent Pendley from effectively leading the bureau.

Three southern Utah counties that supported President Donald Trump's downsizing of two sprawling national monuments in the state also appear on the list. He was the attorney representing San Juan, Kane and Garfield counties when they sought to intervene in lawsuits by conservation and tribal groups challenging the president's actions.