

Oregon agency to audit foster care system

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

The Oregon secretary of state's office is starting an audit on the state's foster care program, putting the child welfare agency squarely in the middle of yet another investigation.

Secretary of State Dennis Richardson told the Statesman Journal in an interview March 7 the audit isn't meant to punish the Department of Human Services, but rather to aid the agency and policymakers — to find out what's happening and how to improve.

A plan has been in the works to audit DHS since before he won the election in November, Richardson said. It will include best practices from other states dealing with child welfare problems, though he doesn't have an exact timeline on when the audit will publish.

"I don't know a lot of the details yet, because I'm still learning my job and I'm not an auditor, but I am the people's watchdog," Richardson said. "They didn't hire me to be the best auditor in the state. They hired me to ensure that our audits divi-

sion focuses on those things that will be of greatest benefit to the citizens."

Deputy Secretary of State Leslie Cummings said larger audits take roughly a year. While Richardson hasn't been given an exact date for publication, he has asked for "incremental reports" from staff.

"I want to know, at each phase, what they're finding, and we can also change our focus in mid-audit if there's something discovered that really needs to be looked at in-depth," he said.

Foster care is a subject near to Richardson. "It's one of his hot buttons that he can't tolerate the abuse of foster children," said Debra Royal, his chief of staff.

Richardson and his wife, Cathy, adopted their foster daughter, Mary, as a young girl. She became the family's eighth daughter and is now a physician's assistant in Portland. "It was difficult even then, which was years ago, to deal with the bureaucracy involved with foster care and adoptions," Richardson said.

A Statesman Journal

investigation this year found that since 2004 reviews mostly carried out by DHS staff pointed out problems the agency had a hard time fixing. These so-called critical incident response team reports have come into the spotlight with Senate Bill 819, which would update the team and add more outside members. A public hearing on the bill is slated for March 13 in the Capitol.

The state agency in charge of child welfare services has been a frequent landing spot for criticism, with Gov.

Brown ordering an independent review of DHS. The eight-month review from consulting firm Public Knowledge LLC, published last September, showed a litany of problems. The review found, for instance, that the state's "response to allegations of abuse in care is confusing and involves too many uncoordinated elements."

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Land

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nificant changes.

The shift comes at a time when armed vigilantes — who took over an Oregon federal bird sanctuary for five weeks last year in a protest against federal management of public lands — threatening violence, were acquitted by a jury of their peers. Three of the defendants were sons of Cliven Bundy, who staged a similar armed standoff in 2014 in Nevada after refusing to pay the fees for grazing his cattle on federal lands.

On the first day of the new Congress, on a largely party-line vote, Republicans passed a rule that made it easier to transfer federal lands by treating such conveyances as cost free to the federal government even if they reduce federal revenue from mining, oil and gas drilling, grazing rights and other sources. Its author was Bishop, who said the rule change "democratizes our process by eliminating bureaucratic red tape."

Without the rules change, members of Congress could have blocked land transfers by requiring proponents to show how the lost revenue would be covered by budget cuts or increased revenue from other sources under the pay-as-you-go rules in effect since 2010.

For millions of Americans and for groups like the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society and Mis-soula, Mont.-based Back-country Hunters and Anglers, the aggressive campaign to divest what they consider to be the national heritage for possible commercial development won't happen without a fight.

And they may have an ally in the new Interior Department Secretary Ryan Zinke, the former Montana congressman who stepped down as a delegate to the GOP's national convention in July

after the platform language cited earlier was adopted.

However Zinke voted for the House rules changes that included the no-cost land transfers language.

So far, the movement to return federal lands to the states has been met with defiance by opponents.

Matt Keller, senior director of conservation with The Wilderness Society, said Bishop's 13-page memo to the Budget Committee laying out a variety of policies he hopes it will adopt was buried in the budget process "hoping nobody would notice."

"Make no mistake," he said. "America is wide awake to these assaults and will not let a bully like Chairman Bishop use hard-earned taxpayer dollars to ensure oil, gas and mining industries can lay waste to the forests, parks and refuges that belong to us all."

Back Country Hunters and Anglers CEO Land Tawney said his group planned to "rally the masses: hunters, anglers, kayakers, bikers, mountain bikers, campers. And we'll do that through state rallies at the legislative level all across the West."

The Sierra Club's "Our Wild America" campaign says public lands should be held "as a 'public trust' for and by all Americans," and helped organize a protest at the Montana state capital in Helena. The Sierra Club calls for further expansions of national monuments and protection of more wilderness areas.

Countering that vision, Bishop's memo to the Budget Committee says his committee will work with the Trump administration "to identify previously declared monuments that are suitable to be rescinded or diminished in size." He calls for the Bureau of Land Management to create a searchable database "of all lands that have been identified for disposal." Bishop said his committee "does not support acquiring additional lands until basic responsibilities are

met on the 80 million acres managed by" the National Park Service or adding to the 193 million acres managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Bishop notes that the park service's deferred maintenance backlog, now nearly \$12 billion, suggests misplaced "management priorities," rather than inadequate funding.

Then-Interior secretary Sally Jewell issued an order in January 2016 ending new coal leases on federal land until an environmental impact statement was completed which would look at coal's impact on climate change and "the social cost of carbon." Bishop has called for the Trump administration to revoke the moratorium on new leases and narrow the scope of the impact statement.

Congress appropriated a one-time cash infusion of \$622 million to help the Forest Service meet wildfire costs last year, a strategy Obama's director of Management and Budget, Shaun Donovan, called "a Band-Aid approach." The problem of "fire borrowing" that takes money from other Forest Service accounts to fight catastrophic wild fires has been debated for years. Bishop would make it federal policy to treat wildfires like any other natural disaster and let the service have access to the Federal Emergency Management Agency Disaster Relief Fund, avoiding fund transfers when its fire suppression budget is exceeded.

Eight days before leaving office, Obama added 48,000 acres to the Cascades-Siskiyou National Monument in Jackson and Klamath counties in Oregon and Siskiyou County in California to the delight of some environmentalists but angering others.

The expansion plan had drawn opposition in a region where federal land use issues led to the armed standoff in southeast Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge last year.

Siskiyou County Board

of Supervisors chairman Michael N. Kobseff said the county was officially opposed to the expansion just as it had been to the original designation by Bill Clinton 16 years before because of its effect on wildfire-fighting and property rights.

"It creates a more volatile environment with the government on your back doorstep," Kobseff added. "It's not a win for liberty."

Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif., who represents the area, said the expansion was a misuse of the Antiquities Act, the 1906 law signed by President Theodore Roosevelt that he used to protect the Grand Canyon, among other national treasures. LaMalfa said he would work to have the Cascades monument expansion rescinded.

Just weeks before he left office, Obama also created the 1.3 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument, long sought by a coalition of Native American tribes, in Bishop's home state of Utah. Bishop has been a critic of the Antiquities Act, which allows presidents to unilaterally designate protected land without input from Congress or local governments. Bishop had opposed Bears Ears. He is working on legislation that would require local consent before a monument could be established.

Bears Ears is in Chaffetz's district and he has asked Trump to rescind the designation. Along with his plan for selling off excess land, now withdrawn, Chaffetz also introduced a bill to get federal Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management rangers off federal lands and let local law enforcement patrol them. Its rationale is to minimize conflicts between federal agents and local residents like what happened at Malheur, he has said.

The bill Chaffetz withdrew would have authorized the sale at fair market value of BLM land identified in 1997 as ex-

cess and disposable. That includes 21,400 acres in Maricopa County, Ariz., worth an estimated \$12.6 million in 1997; 560 acres in Larimer County, Colo, estimated at \$224,000; and one acre of private timberland in Marion County, Oregon, worth \$1,000.

It also includes 55,889 acres with an estimated 1997 value of \$5.3 million in Chaffetz's district.

Land Tawney of the Backcountry Hunters says he still believes a democratic society is driven to act "by the people who show up," and he's convinced that large numbers don't support the

proposed land giveaways.

"The response from hunters and angler's to Rep. Chaffetz's bill to dispose of 3 million acres of public lands was swift and unapologetic," he said by email this week. "In unprecedented fashion, he withdrew his bill within days of its introduction. Rep. Bishop should heed the call of American sportsmen and abandon his misguided legislation or he'll likewise experience the ire of public lands users, including those from his home district in Utah."

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Health

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leave those Medicaid expansion individuals without coverage," Oregon Health Authority spokeswoman Courtney Warner Crowell said.

In January, Gov. Kate Brown announced Oregon secured a federal waiver needed for the state's Medicaid program. On Tuesday, Brown, a Democrat, criticized the proposed Affordable Care Act replacement from U.S. House Republicans,

which is being called the American Health Care Act.

"The Republicans' proposed health care bill represents a radical change that is shortsighted and moves health care backward, not forward," Brown said in a statement.

"It would reduce Oregonians' access to care and increase costs for women and seniors," she said. "I am especially concerned about how this bill would negatively jeopardize our state's budget and economy, especially in rural Oregon."

House Republicans

took to The Wall Street Journal in support of the proposal. U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee and wrote an editorial published in Tuesday's newspaper with U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas.

"Our fiscally responsible plan will lower costs for patients and begin returning control from Washington back to the states, so that they can tailor their health-care systems to their unique communities," the two wrote. "The bill will improve access to care and restore the free market, increas-

ing innovation, competition and choice."

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Voting

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off sites.

But those sites are not as numerous or convenient as former polling places, Devlin said.

Low-income or disabled voters, as well as people in institutions such as nursing homes, might have difficulty procuring a stamp or making it to a drop site, he said.

And young people — accustomed to conducting all their business online — might find a trip to the

post office onerous.

"They are just not into the stamp culture," Dem-brow said.

Senate Bill 683 would include business-class postage on ballot return envelopes. That means the state would be charged only if the ballot is returned through the mail.

It would take effect with elections held after Jan. 1, 2019. It would cost about \$300,000 in the 2017-2019 budget, and about \$1.3 million for each 2-year budget after that.

Not all committee members were convinced of the need.

"It seems absolutely unreasonable that we would incur millions of dollars of expenses for postage, essentially to acknowledge that we've become so dysfunctional in society, and our ballot casting is of so little value, that we couldn't cover the cost of a stamp," committee vice-chairman and Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli said.

The committee did not take action on the bill. tloew@statesmanjournal.com, 503-399-6779 or follow at Twitter.com/Tracy_Loew



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