

Despite complaints, Interior boss pushing big reorganization

DENVER (AP) — Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is pressing ahead with a massive overhaul of his department, despite growing opposition to his proposal to move hundreds of public employees out of Washington and create a new organizational map that largely ignores state boundaries.

Zinke wants to divide most of the department’s 70,000 employees and their responsibilities into 13 regions based on rivers and ecosystems, instead of the current map based mostly on state lines.

The proposal would relocate many of the Interior Department’s top decision-makers from Washington to still-undisclosed cities in the West. The headquarters of some of its major bureaus also would move to the West.

The concept — supported in principle by many Western politicians from both parties — is to get top officials closer to the natural resources and cultural sites they manage. The Interior Department oversees a vast expanse of public lands, mainly in the West, that are rich in wild-life, parks, archaeological and historic sites, oil and gas, coal and grazing ranges.

It also oversees huge dams and reservoirs that are vital to some of the West’s largest cities and most productive agricultural land.

Rep. Raul Grijalva of Arizona, the ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Natural Resources, suspects the plan is an attempt to undercut the department by pressuring senior employees to quit rather than relocating, leaving positions unfilled and creating confusion about who regulates what.

“I think it’s a very thinly disguised attempt to gut the Department of Interior and its bureaus,” he said.

Grijalva also questioned the value of moving more department employees West, saying more than 90 percent are already in field offices outside Washington.

Grijalva and Democratic Rep. Donald McEachin of Virginia, also a member of the Natural Resources Committee, on Wednesday accused Zinke of withholding key information from lawmakers and trying to implement the plan piecemeal while avoiding full scrutiny from Congress.

Congress has the final say over the proposal.

And a bipartisan group of Western governors complained to Zinke two weeks ago that he shut them out of the planning for the reorganization. The Republican-dominated Western Gov-



In this Feb. 9 file photo, U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke speaks during an conservation announcement at the Western Conservation and Hunting Expo Friday in Salt Lake City.

nors Association expressed concern that organizing the department around natural features instead of state lines would weaken their states’ influence on department decisions.

Zinke’s spokeswoman, Heather Swift, said Wednesday that moving more Interior Department employees to the West has received overwhelming backing from Congress and state governments, and that managing by ecosystems, instead of state borders, has “a lot of support.”

Six Republican members of the House Natural Resources Committee told Zinke last month they support the reorganization. They said it would improve agency efficiency and responsiveness.

The Interior Department has been unusually tight-lipped about the plan and has not said how many of its Washington-based employees would be moved, where in the West they would land, when they would go, or how much the overhaul would cost.

Swift said the department has briefed both Republican and Democratic congressional staffers and state officials on the proposal. She also said the department does not have a final plan.

But the agency has already compiled a tentative map of the new regions, provided to The Associated Press by the Western Governors Association. And budget documents released Monday show the department is already taking steps to implement it.

The department requested \$17.5 million in 2019 to get the plan started

and to move an undisclosed number of employees from their Washington headquarters to the West.

The budget documents included only a broad outline of the proposal and did not address in detail how it would affect the department’s basic responsibility — managing natural resources.

In an email to the AP on Wednesday, Swift said boundaries based on rivers and ecosystems would allow resource managers to do a better job and coordinate more closely because nature doesn’t follow political boundaries. She used a deer herd as an example.

“In just one season alone, the herd might pass through a national park, state land, a wildlife refuge and private land — and along its migration, it could wander through two or three different states,” she said.

Zinke has compared his proposed regional boundaries to the ideas of John Wesley Powell, a famed one-armed Civil War veteran and Grand Canyon explorer. Powell argued — unsuccessfully — that Western state boundaries should be drawn along river systems, not arbitrary survey lines, because of the importance of water in the largely arid region.

Donald Worster, an environmental historian and author of “A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell,” said Zinke’s plan bears only a faint resemblance to Powell’s.

“Powell had a very clear definition of the ‘problem’ his map was supposed to fix,” Worster said in an email to the AP.

BRIEFLY

Trump at last denounces abuse; Kelly’s future in doubt

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump at last broke his silence Wednesday to explicitly denounce domestic violence in the wake of allegations that a top White House aide had abused two former wives.

Chief of staff John Kelly, under fire for mishandling the matter, stayed largely out of sight, his future in doubt and the White House in tumult.

The chaos surrounding the departure of aide Rob Porter put a harsh spotlight on Kelly, the retired general who was brought on last summer to instill military-like discipline in the free-wheeling West Wing. Questions persisted about what and when Kelly knew about the abuse allegations against Porter, who resigned as staff secretary last week after the accusations became public.

West Wing aides have had their faith in the chief of staff shaken, and morale has plunged to levels not seen since last spring’s firing of FBI Director James Comey and the August uproar over Trump’s refusal to denounce white supremacists after the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Porn star who alleged Trump affair: I can now tell my story

NEW YORK (AP) — Stormy Daniels, the porn star whom Donald Trump’s attorney acknowledges paying \$130,000 just before Election Day, believes she is now free to discuss an alleged sexual encounter with the man who is now president, her manager told The Associated Press Wednesday.

At the same time, developments in the bizarre case are fueling questions about whether such a payment could violate federal campaign finance laws.

Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, believes that Trump’s personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, invalidated a non-disclosure agreement after two news stories were published Tuesday: one in which Cohen told *The New York Times* he made the six-figure payment with his personal funds, and another in the *Daily Beast*, which reported that Cohen was shopping a book proposal that would touch on Daniels’ story, said the manager, Gina Rodriguez.

“Everything is off now, and Stormy is going to tell her story,” Rodriguez said.

AP sources: Romney focusing Senate bid on Utah, not Trump

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Mitt Romney is preparing to announce a bid for Utah’s Senate seat held by retiring Orrin Hatch, a position some hope the 2012 GOP presidential nominee will use to continue his biting criticism of President Donald Trump.

Romney, who once called Trump “a phony” who was unfit for office, is not expected to address the president in an announcement video he has prepared for release online, according to people with direct knowledge of his plans.

Romney had planned to release the video on Thursday, they said, but he tweeted Wednesday night that he would not make an announcement about Utah’s Senate race because of the deadly school shooting in Florida.

It wasn’t clear when he would reschedule his announcement.

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