

Public Lands management under cloak of darkness
No June business meeting of Desert District Advisory Council

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by Lisbet Thoresen, Public lands representative for SDMG

THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR (DOI) is taking a hiatus from transparency and public engagement on crucial decision-making that has longterm implications and impacts, especially for Rockhounds. DOI announced on May 11, 2017 that it would be reviewing department function and process. All meetings of advisory boards and councils, including 220 **Resource Advisory Councils (RACs)** and the **Desert District Advisory Council (DAC)** in California, as well as all subcommittees and subgroups are suspended during this review. One of the reasons given for this review is that the advisory panels may not be engaging effectively with the public. Shutting down the spigot on communication would seem to aggravate, not obviate such concerns.

The review is expected to conclude in September. Meanwhile, land use policy planning is going forward without any forum available for public input.

The stated goal of the review is ironic, to say the least, given that National Monument designations made by presidential proclamation under authority of the Antiquities Act of 1906 by **Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama** are currently under threat of being rescinded on the grounds that the public did not have adequate opportunity to provide input on their creation. Never mind that this justification is not applicable to presidential proclamations – they are not subject to public review.

The DOI review was triggered by an executive order signed on April 26, 2017, which appears aimed at gutting the Antiquities Act of 1906 altogether. If one concedes for the sake of argument that National Monuments should be created only by Congress, only after the public has had opportunity to provide input, shouldn't the public have opportunity to comment on

all land use amendments, planning processes, and policy changes proposed for existing federal lands, especially when selling or swapping land is contemplated? The **RACs** and **DAC** were created specifically because government recognized that the answer to this question is yes – the public shall have input, and that input will be incorporated into land use administration.

Depending upon where you live, you may not be all that thrilled with the advisory council that is supposed to serve you. Your local **RAC** may be more or less responsive to the public. We are fortunate in southern California that the **BLM** makes an effort at outreach; although, yes, it should give more notice on meeting locations and times – realistically, people should have 30 days notice. Draft plans and reports should be available for review and discussion before the meeting, not at the meeting or afterwards. However, the corrective is not to abolish the **DAC**, which is a vital conduit for communicating public interests to the **BLM**. By and large, our local **BLM** offices and their field officers are pretty responsive and sympathetic to Rockhounds. Consider the alternative, where no medium for discourse exists or is even required by law.

So, lest the **DOI's** hiatus becomes permanent, and you might want your forums restored for giving input on how **BLM** could do better and how federal lands should be administered, **DOI Secretary Zinke** needs to hear from the public. Silence is condonation, and now is no time to be complacent or silent.

BLM did right by the public when it submitted its own letter requesting reinstatement of the **DAC/RAC** meetings on May 11th. The letter was signed by **71 DAC/RAC** members and **BLM** staff supporting YOU (see the short url below).

<https://goo.gl/YC0ouj>

Feel free to download a sample letter requesting reinstatement of the DAC and RACs at:

http://www.sdmg.org/blmdocs/Zinke_letter_reinstate_DAC_201706.doc

–or– (short url): <https://goo.gl/d8f2WH>