

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 11, 2017

Secretary Ryan Zinke
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

We write to express our deep concern over recent reports regarding the suspension of meetings and activities of committees and advisory boards, including Resource Advisory Councils and Resource Advisory Committees.

Resource Advisory Councils (RACs) were created by the Department of the Interior (DOI) in 1995 as a way for the DOI to get diverse community input on public land management issues. RACs have helped inform decisions on issues related to recreation, land use planning, grazing, oil and gas exploration, and wildfire management.

As you know, public land management issues can be very contentious, particularly in the west, as agencies and stakeholders navigate projects that can impact the health of the environment and the longevity of the local economy. Balancing these interests is challenging, which is why RACs were created. By working through difficult land management issues and getting local input from the beginning, projects are more likely to succeed. Without this tool, many good land management projects would never be completed.


Recently, many of us heard from members of RACs in our states that all meetings for those RACs were postponed until September 2017 because the DOI is conducting a review of all advisory boards and committees. Our offices did not receive notice of the postponements and little information was provided to the members of the RACs explaining the reason behind this action. We are very concerned about this news and would like an answer as to why the RAC meetings were postponed during the BLM's review of all advisory boards and committees, and how the BLM will continue to support local collaborative efforts, including RACs, going forward so that they can continue to make real progress for our public lands.

An additional concern arises in Oregon, where Resource Advisory Committees operated by the Bureau of Land Management were created by the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act of 2000 (SRS) to help develop and carry out forest management projects. The DOI review also halts these Resource Advisory Committee meetings. SRS Resource Advisory Committees initiate projects on BLM forests that improve forest health, create local jobs, and achieve forest management goals. These projects are funded under Title II of SRS, and Resource Advisory Committees must select and initiate their projects by September 30, 2017. If RAC meetings are postponed until September and SRS Committees do not have enough time to meet and initiate projects, they will lose their Title II funding. This delay could cause counties in Oregon to lose federal funds that could have gone to improve the health of their forests and create local jobs.


During your confirmation hearing, you stressed the importance of local input and collaboration on public land management issues. This is exactly what RACs were formed to do and there are examples of RACs across the country contributing to successful projects that improve the quality of our public lands. Postponing their progress is a detriment to public land and forest management goals, to jobs and local economies, and to public confidence in federal government. It is critical that local voices, including RACs, have the opportunity to provide input and take part in the process at all times, not just when those local voices align with the Administration or a large special interest.

We urge you to allow RACs and SRS Resource Advisory Committees to continue their regular meetings and advance the important work Congress directed them to do. We look forward to your response.


Sincerely,




Ron Wyden
United States Senator



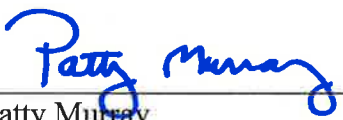
Tom Udall
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



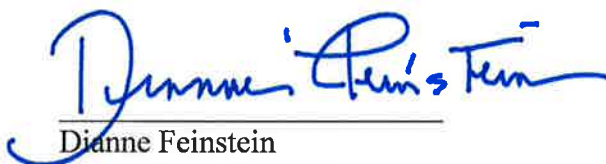
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator




Patty Murray
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator