

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 29, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

We are writing to express our concerns about the pace and process for recruiting and appointing members to the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Resource Advisory Committees (RACs). As you are well aware, RACs are comprised of 10 to 15 members with diverse backgrounds and interests who work collaboratively to support and advise the BLM in its public land management responsibilities. These volunteers represent a variety of interests, including ranching, recreation, industry, environmental, local elected officeholders, state natural resource agencies and Native American tribes.

The process of recruiting, nominating and appointing RAC volunteers is critical to ensuring thoughtful, well-rounded and robust public engagement and input. Members devote many hours to studying issues, traveling to meetings and engaging with others in the best interests of our public lands. Recently, it has come to our attention that RAC appointments have slowed to an unprecedented pace, and well-qualified, well-regarded and widely-supported applicants have not been appointed or reappointed to several RACs in Oregon.

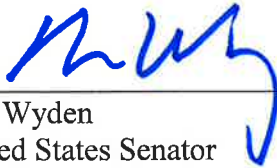
Quite recently, the BLM sent out a news release announcing a public call for nominations for three Oregon RACs, as well as the Steens Mountain Advisory Council. According to the agency director, there are six open positions on the RACs, and five open positions on the Steens council. Despite the advertised need for qualified volunteers, we have heard from a number of applicants – several of whom have served in the recent past – that they were not reappointed, and that they were offered no reason for being denied from either the BLM or the Department of Interior.

This failure to reappoint and lack of explanation is a significant concern because it creates gaps in these volunteer groups' ability to properly advise the government. For instance, the John-Day Snake River RAC has two open positions in "Category two" for representatives of environmental, archeological and historical, dispersed recreation or wild horse and burro organizations, but denied without explanation a re-application from a respected and longtime RAC volunteer representing an environmental nonprofit. The Steens Mountain Advisory Council's situation is more dire. The committee, with five open seats, lacks a quorum and cannot meet to fulfill its duties under the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000. Despite the high number of vacancies, three individuals reported their applications were denied.

Given these current vacancies, the failure to reappoint volunteers and BLM's need to engage the public in management of the public lands, we are requesting information concerning the RAC member nomination and appointment process and the rationale for the failure to re-appoint the RAC members mentioned above. Specifically, we are requesting information on nominations approved at the BLM State Director level for the years 2017-2018 that were denied at the Washington office for the BLM and the rationale for those denials.

We will look forward to a full and considered response to this request within 30 days.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator