

NPS to superintendents: Opposed to drilling? Call us first

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David Vela, the acting deputy director of operations for the National Park Service, has told superintendents to notify Washington before making official comments on projects related to Interior Department priorities. @the_sca/Twitter

Any national park superintendent who fears the effects of nearby energy development may want to think twice before speaking out.

David Vela, the acting deputy director of operations for the National Park Service, has ordered superintendents to flag Washington before making any official comments on projects that pertain to Interior Department priorities, including energy development.

In a [memo](#) made public today, Vela said it's important that the Washington office be notified in advance "to ensure that NPS comments receive appropriate senior level awareness and coordination."

Critics denounced the plan as another example of how the Trump administration has sought to silence experts who manage parks and public lands.

"The administration is touting this guidance as a way to provide coordination and engagement between federal agencies, but in reality this is nothing more than an intimidation tactic, deterring park experts on the front lines from expressing views that might contradict the administration's aggressive pro-fossil fuels energy policy," said Theresa Pierno, president and CEO for the National Parks Conservation Association.

She called the memo "unprecedented" and said it would infringe on park staffs' ability to comment on projects that could have damaging impacts on parks.

Vela, who was tapped by President Trump to lead the park service but never confirmed by the Senate, said the guidance applies to any Interior Department proposals and projects "that relate to DOI priorities." That includes such things as energy development, access to park resources, broadband and telecommunications projects, and wildlife corridors.

"In order for the NPS to continue to engage effectively, it is critical that we pursue coordinated, collaborative, and science-based approaches to reviewing proposals, developing comments and communicating with lead agencies and states," Vela said in his memo, which he sent Aug. 13.

Commenting on projects outside of park borders is nothing new for superintendents and other park leaders.

The Washington Post, which first **reported on the memo** today, cited a case from 2017 when park officials in Utah asked BLM to hold off on plans to lease 17,000 acres of public land for drilling. In a **public comment**, Kate Cannon, superintendent of the park service's Southeast Utah Group, said the proposal to offer land for oil and gas exploration so close to national parks in the state would be "detrimental."

Jeremy Barnum, a spokesman for the park service, said the memo was only sent "to provide commonsense guidance to National Park Service managers on how best to provide consistent, productive, and timely engagement in other agencies' proposals and projects that may affect parks and the visitor experience."

"Coordination with bureau leadership in Washington on matters that are of high priority to the Department of the Interior has been common throughout various administrations," Barnum said. "Similarly, as has been the case in any administration, Washington may ask parks to provide the comments they are preparing should Washington determine that senior-level awareness and coordination are needed. That is not anything new."

Barnum said the park service will also continue to rely "heavily on the expertise and professional judgment of parks."