

Biden administration will keep 28 million acres in Alaska closed to drilling and mining

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Interior Secretary Deb Haaland will keep in place protections against potential oil and gas development and mining claims on 28 million acres of federal land across Alaska, the federal government said Tuesday.

The lands were protected from such development in the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The Trump administration took steps to remove the protections, an effort supported by Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy and U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan.

But the Biden administration said it found legal flaws in the previous administration's effort, leading to a new environmental review to determine the best use of the lands.

Haaland signed the decision Friday, following an environmental review and public input. A new public land order will retain the protections.

"Continuing these essential protections, which have been in place for decades, will ensure continued access and use of these public lands now and in the future," Haaland said in a statement from the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the lands.

Dunleavy said on social media on Tuesday that the decision is "the latest sanction against Alaska by the Biden-Harris administration."

"They are attempting to turn Alaska into one big national park," Dunleavy said. "Alaska is still owed five million acres of land under the Statehood Act. Every one of these sanctions harms Alaska's ability to prosper."

Joe Plesha, communications director for Murkowski, said public land orders have become "political land orders" under the Biden administration.

"Alaskans have been completely railroaded as the BLM goes back on their own recommendation and commitment to return Alaska's lands to federal multiple use status," Plesha said.

The protected lands are spread across Alaska. They're about the size of Pennsylvania, collectively. In Western Alaska, they're in the western Interior, Seward Peninsula and Bristol Bay regions. They're also located in Southcentral Alaska and in eastern Alaska.

According to the Bureau of Land Management, the agency received 15,000 public comments for the draft review, overwhelmingly favoring the protections.

The environmental review found that revoking any of the protections would likely harm subsistence hunting and fishing in dozens of Alaska Native communities that would lose federal subsistence priority over certain lands, the agency said. Wildlife, vegetation and permafrost would also be negatively impacted, it found.

Conservation groups and some Alaska Native groups on Tuesday praised the decision. Among their concerns, they had asserted that unlocking some of the lands could have allowed an expansion of mining opportunities around the Donlin Gold mine prospect near the middle Kuskokwim River.

"Secretary Haaland's decision today is an important step toward a future full of healthy lands, waters, and people who thrive on wild salmon, waterfowl, other migratory animals, and seasonal plant life," said Anaan'arar Sophie Swope, executive director of Mother Kuskokwim.

The decision does not impact land available for selection by eligible individuals under the Alaska Native Vietnam-era Veterans Land Allotment Program, the agency said.

The Biden administration has taken other major actions to limit development in Alaska, such as implementing strong protections for most land in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and rejecting a

federal right-of-way for a 200-mile road to the Ambler mineral district in Northwest Alaska.

But in a controversial move, the administration last year approved ConocoPhillips' giant Willow oil project in the petroleum reserve.

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