



BLM employees who buck relocation out West must leave by early next year

BY REBECCA BEITSCH - 11/20/19

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees who choose severance over accompanying the agency as it moves out West will have to be out of their job by Jan. 31 of next year.

In an email to BLM staff, acting Director William Pendley said eligible employees may begin applying for early retirement or voluntary separation incentive payments as early as next week.

“Once approved, your separation from federal service must occur no later than January 31, 2020,” he wrote in an email to staff obtained by The Hill.

The email is just the latest sign that BLM will be proceeding with its controversial relocation despite objections from lawmakers, including a group yesterday who asked appropriators to block funding for the move.

BLM’s relocation plans would move the majority of the agency’s D.C.-based staff to various offices across the West, leaving just 61 of its 10,000 employees in the nation’s capital.

BLM’s leadership argues the relocation will put employees closer to the public lands they manage. But critics, which include lawmakers as well as current and former BLM employees, argue the move will functionally dismantle the agency while gutting it of expert staff.

Letters given to staff on Nov. 12 made clear that staff had 30 days to accept the move or face being booted from the federal workforce.

Those letters also cemented the timeline for the move, as employees would have another three months after that 30-day window to report at their new posting.

Pendley’s latest email shows BLM will be quickly losing some of its longtime staff as people accept early retirement and voluntary separation payments.

Steve Ellis, who served in the top career post in the agency until 2016, said the timelines set forth by BLM to take those financial incentives are not unusual. But he said they will help accelerate loss of staff at an agency that has otherwise “fast-tracked” the relocation.

“The brain drain has already started,” he said, as a number of employees have already left or are eyeing the door.

“What I’m hearing is the majority of these employees are going to leave the agency, they're looking for jobs,” he continued. “There will be a loss of expertise from these employees that for whatever reason can’t move.”