

Jewell on monuments: 'If Congress doesn't act, we will'

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Interior Secretary Sally Jewell today said President Obama will take executive action to protect the nation's treasured lands if Congress fails to act.

It was the strongest statement yet in Jewell's six-month tenure that the Interior Department will pursue permanent steps to protect some public lands from future oil and gas drilling and mining.

It came during Jewell's wide-ranging speech to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., which outlined her conservation priorities for the president's second term.

They include lobbying Congress for a "rational" budget allowing for key conservation investments; partnering with the private sector to hire and engage more youth in the outdoors; and balancing energy development on public lands with effective, business-friendly mitigation.

Jewell highlighted the need to take proactive steps to conserve public lands for future generations, peppering her speech with quotes from noted conservationists Aldo Leopold and Teddy Roosevelt.

"Conservation is 'not just about doing nothing, it's about doing something affirmative to make sure that we are passing on this incredible blessing that we have,'" Jewell said, quoting Leopold.

Jewell said she will be meeting with communities in the coming months to identify public lands deserving of protection as national monuments under the Antiquities Act.

She chastised Congress for going three years without protecting a single new acre of land as a national park or wilderness.

"If Congress doesn't step up to act to protect some of these important places that have been identified by communities and people throughout the country, then the president will take action," Jewell said, suggesting that Congress pass another omnibus lands bill. "There's no question that if Congress doesn't act, we will."

Jewell echoed Obama's State of the Union address this year, in which he pledged that, without congressional action, U.S. EPA would take administrative steps to curb domestic carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, which the agency has begun to do.

Obama has designated nine national monuments so far, including the 243,000-acre Rio Grande del Norte monument in New Mexico. Presidents historically designate most of their monuments in their second terms.

"She rightfully pressured Congress to get moving on conservation," said Brian O'Donnell, executive director of the Conservation Lands Foundation. "But more importantly, she demonstrated that she will listen to communities that want their public lands safeguarded."

Jewell said that although it's unlikely she will get 100 percent buy-in on any national monument designations, the agency will not pursue protections in places where there is significant conflict. She did not identify any sites that are under consideration.

Jewell also blasted the Republican House for proposing to cut funding to national parks by 13 percent and to the Fish and Wildlife Service by nearly a third.

She took a veiled swipe at Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), who this week released a report calling for a halt in land acquisitions until the Park Service tackles its maintenance backlog. Jewell said those who criticize land acquisitions are often the same lawmakers who have gutted the agency's budget, worsening the backlog.

She urged Congress to pass Obama's budget, which calls for full mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund by 2015 -- a tough sell in a fiscally strapped Congress.

"The real test of whether you support conservation is not what you say in a press conference when the cameras are rolling, but whether you fight for it in the budget conference," Jewell said.

She also spoke of the challenges of identifying the right lands for oil and gas production, which has remained relatively stagnant on public lands even as it soars on private lands in states including North Dakota and Texas.

The challenge is acute in places like the Arctic, she said, where Alaska Natives have implored her to expand oil drilling while protecting the caribou they depend on for food.

But she said places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should remain off-limits to drilling.

"It is an extraordinary place," said Jewell, who spent a night in the 19-million-acre refuge last month and said she saw 29 polar bears. "You never look at nature in quite the same way until you've been there."

Jewell today signed a secretarial order -- her first as secretary -- ordering an agencywide, comprehensive mitigation plan to ensure industrial projects are efficiently permitted on public lands but also offset by strategic conservation ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 31).

Jewell also spoke at length about the impacts of the 16-day government shutdown, including the angst it caused her employees who had to bar citizens from their public lands.

While the closure of national parks and monuments sparked outrage across the country and triggered oversight hearings on Capitol Hill, Jewell said there was "absolutely no political motivation" associated with the closures.

"The barricades were there to protect the resources," she said in reference to decisions to close sites including the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. "The monuments don't take care of themselves."

The shutdown offered a silver lining by highlighting to the American people the spiritual and economic value of national parks, Jewell argued.

"To quote a well-known line from a Joni Mitchell song, 'You don't know what you've got till it's gone,'" she said.

Several conservation groups hailed the speech.

"We agree with Secretary Jewell that we can't wait to protect new places as national monuments so more communities can capture the economic benefits that go hand-in-hand with having a landmark landscape in their backyard," said a statement by League of Conservation Voters President Gene Karpinski.

Ellis Richard, founder of the group Park Rangers for Our Lands, called the 40-minute speech Jewell's "strongest statement to date supporting conservation values of the public lands her department manages."

Ducks Unlimited CEO Dale Hall, a former George W. Bush administration wildlife official, praised Jewell for spotlighting the economic value of public lands, noting that sportsmen and women spent more than \$144 billion on wildlife-related activities in 2011 -- spending that largely depends on land access.

Jamie Williams, president of the Wilderness Society, said Jewell's pledge to promote mitigation in conjunction with energy development is a "wise step."

"We applaud Secretary Jewell for finding ways to connect a diverse country to its great outdoors, and we support the Obama administration in taking bold actions to ensure these special places will be protected for future generations of Americans," he said.