

final report in 120 days, and any actions Trump takes as a result are likely to face legal challenges, especially if he tries to revoke previous designations.

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Zinke starts offshore leasing program review [Back](#)

By Esther Whieldon | 05/01/2017 03:52 PM EDT

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke signed a secretarial order today directing BOEM to start a review of the agency's five-year plan for offering oil and gas leases in federally controlled waters.

The move follows President Donald Trump's Friday [executive order](#) directing the agency to launch the review of the leasing plan set in place by the Obama administration.

"We're going to look at everything," Zinke said before signing the order at a Consumer Energy Alliance event in Houston, which was streamed on Facebook.

WHAT'S NEXT: Zinke told reporters last week the review of the offshore plan could take two years to complete.

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Zinke taps political ally to coordinate Interior energy work [Back](#)

By Esther Whieldon | 05/01/2017 04:49 PM EDT

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke today named the treasurer of his former congressional leadership PAC to a newly created position coordinating the agency's energy policies across its nine bureaus.

Vincent DeVito, a Boston-based energy lawyer, will be counselor to the secretary for energy policy, where he will be responsible for ensuring all the agencies are on the same page, Zinke said at a Consumer Energy Alliance event in Houston, which was streamed on Facebook.

Between the Fish and Wildlife Service, BOEM, BSEE, BLM "and all the different departments I have, it's confusing for me," Zinke said.

"So I just need a single point of contact. ... We have to look at ourselves through to make sure we're streamlined and our regulations aren't arbitrary," he said.

When Zinke was a member of the House, DeVito, a partner at Bowditch & Dewey, was listed as treasurer for Zinke's leadership PAC, the Supporting Electing American Leaders or SEAL PAC.

DeVito has worked on a number of energy issues, including on [pipelines](#). He represented conservation land trusts in opposing Northeast Energy Direct — a project Kinder Morgan

withdrew its federal application in May 2016.

DeVito also worked in the George W. Bush administration as Department of Energy's general counsel's office and as DOE's U.S. Assistant Secretary of Energy for Policy and International Affairs.

WHAT'S NEXT: DeVito does not require Senate confirmation for his newly created position, and Zinke did not provide any indication of when President Donald Trump would nominate more senior leaders at Interior.

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DOE beachhead member lands senior EERE post [Back](#)

By Darius Dixon | 05/01/2017 05:30 PM EDT

The Institute for Energy Research's Daniel Simmons will take up a leading post at the Department of Energy as the acting assistant secretary for the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, the agency said in an email to staff today.

DOE said Simmons, a former vice president for policy at the libertarian-leaning IER, would take the role of principal deputy assistant secretary for the office effective today. However, without an EERE assistant secretary who has been nominated and confirmed by the Senate, Simmons can only hold the position on a temporary basis.

DOE confirmed Simmons' appointment.

Simmons was a member of President Donald Trump's transition and beachhead teams at DOE. Before joining IER, he directed the Natural Resources Task Force at the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Steven Chalk, who had served in the position for the past few months, will now return to his role as the deputy assistant secretary for operations, according to the email.

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Pruitt won't attend Oklahoma GOP fundraiser [Back](#)

By Annie Snider | 04/27/2017 09:59 AM EDT

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt will not attend a May 5 Oklahoma GOP fundraiser because of a flier touting his appearance, he said this morning.

"We're not going to be able to attend because of the invitation that was sent out," Pruitt told Fox News Radio host Brian Kilmeade.

Pruitt noted that his attendance had been approved in advance by EPA's ethics office, but it was the flier, which used his title and promoted remarks he would make about his EPA job, that "prevented my attendance."

Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) (D-R.I.) this week alleged that Pruitt's appearance would violate the Hatch Act, the law limiting political activities by presidential appointees and other government officials, and asked the U.S. Office of Special Counsel to investigate.

In the radio interview, Pruitt was asked whether he will urge Trump to exit the Paris climate change agreement. "Without a doubt, yes," he responded.

"It's just a bad business deal, it's something we need to exit. We need to stay at the table, we need to show the leadership to the rest of the world as we already are, but Paris is ... an America last strategy as opposed to an America first strategy," he said.

After an uproar over previous comments about the role carbon emissions play in climate change, Pruitt today acknowledged that "climate change is occurring and human activity contributes to that, carbon contributes to that." But, he said, "we can't measure with precision the amount of human activity, what it contributes to that climate change."

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Let kids' climate suit go to trial, judge recommends [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 05/01/2017 04:21 PM EDT

A federal magistrate judge today said that a group of children seeking to force the federal government to take drastic action on climate change should be allowed to make their case in court.

The Trump administration, backed up by the oil and manufacturing industries, in March asked a judge in the U.S. District Court in Oregon to let them leapfrog her and ask the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals to toss out the case before it goes to trial.

In a 16-page [recommendation](#) today, Thomas Coffin, a magistrate judge assisting with the case, recommended that District Court Judge Ann Aiken reject the administration's request. Aiken [concluded](#) last year that there were enough questions to merit a trial.

Many of the legal questions are inextricably tied to scientific questions about climate change's causes and risks, as well as the government's past and current efforts to curb greenhouse gases or encourage fossil fuel development, Coffin wrote. A trial would allow the Trump administration and industry groups to present any evidence against climate change and its risks in a public forum, he added.

The children behind the lawsuit argue that the government has violated a public trust doctrine by knowing of climate change for decades but not doing enough to combat the threat. The Obama

and Trump administrations have rejected that argument.

The Trump administration could still ask the 9th Circuit to get involved, but officials would have a much harder time if Aiken agrees with Coffin.

WHAT'S NEXT: Judge Aiken must decide whether to agree with Coffin's assessment or give her blessing to the Trump administration's early appeal effort.

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Pruitt says EPA working on plans to approve states' coal ash programs [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 05/01/2017 05:17 PM EDT

EPA is working on its procedures for reviewing and approving states' coal ash permitting programs, Administrator Scott Pruitt said in a Friday [letter](#).

A water infrastructure package that was signed into law in December included a bipartisan compromise on coal ash regulation that came in response to EPA's 2014 regulation on coal ash, a toxic byproduct of burning coal for electricity. The [compromise](#) shifted permitting responsibilities to the states, which must first get EPA approval of their programs' broad contours, while EPA gained more enforcement powers and other concessions.

EPA is currently working on the needed guidance for states to seek such approval, Pruitt wrote in a letter to Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval.

"EPA has started developing guidance for states about how EPA expects to review and approve state applications to operate permit programs and allow flexibility in individual permits in lieu of the national standards," Pruitt wrote.

The topic was discussed at a recent gathering of state environmental officials, and the agency plans to go into technical detail with the Association of State and Territorial Solid Waste Management Officials, Pruitt added.

WHAT'S NEXT: EPA will develop draft guidance and may seek public input before issuing final guidance on how it will review state submissions.

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Bipartisan coal ash provision included in final WRDA [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 12/05/2016 04:28 PM EDT

The final version of the [Water Resources Development Act](#) released today by House and Senate negotiators includes a tweaked version of language passed earlier this year by the Senate that would change the permitting and enforcement regime for EPA's coal ash rule.

The language will require states to get EPA approval for their coal ash disposal permitting plans, and the agency will also gain more enforcement powers, on top of potential citizen lawsuits.

"This new permitting authority fixes the main problems with the recent coal ash regulation issued by the Environmental Protection Agency, by removing citizen suits as the sole means of enforcement and allowing states to tailor permit requirements on a case-by-case basis," Sens. [Jim Inhofe](#), [Joe Manchin](#), [Shelley Moore Capito](#) and [John Hoeven](#) said in a joint statement.

The provision won bipartisan backing, although various environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Environmental Integrity Project and the Waterkeeper Alliance, raised issues with the language.

The new language would also extend EPA's timeline to review authorized state programs from every five years to every 12 years. And it gives EPA more time to review state programs, includes language allowing states to ask EPA to review a neighboring state's program, and requires EPA to operate a backstop permit program for states without authorized programs.

The bill is expected to hit the House floor this week.

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Conservatives demanding details on federal workers' encryption use [Back](#)

By Andrew Restuccia | 02/14/2017 03:00 PM EDT

Republicans in Congress and their conservative allies are demanding details about federal workers' use of encrypted messaging apps, part of a broader counterattack on employees suspected of opposing President Donald Trump's agenda.

Congressional Republicans are also pondering changes to longstanding laws that protect government workers, further stoking fears among some federal employees that the new administration's supporters are out to squash dissent.

Republicans on the House Science Committee took up the cause on Tuesday by [asking](#) EPA's inspector general to review reports that agency employees are using an app called Signal, which allows people to exchange encrypted text messages and phone calls. POLITICO [reported](#) this month that a group of fewer than a dozen EPA employees were using the app to discuss what they would do if Trump's political appointees flout the law or delete valuable scientific data.

The anti-Trump resistance has infuriated Republicans, who fear that dissenters in the government could undercut the president's policy proposals by unleashing even more embarrassing leaks. They also contend that the use of encrypted messaging circumvents federal record-keeping laws — an argument Science Chairman [Lamar Smith](#) (R-Texas) echoed in Tuesday's letter.

"[T]he Committee is concerned that these encrypted and off-the-record communication practices,

if true, run afoul of federal record-keeping requirements, leaving information that could be responsive to future Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and congressional requests unattainable," wrote Smith, who organized the letter to the IG. The panel has jurisdiction over many cybersecurity issues.

Outside conservative groups have launched similar efforts.

Citing POLITICO's story, the Cause of Action Institute, a right-leaning watchdog group, filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act this month seeking EPA employees' communications using Signal. "The bottom line is: An encrypted app is basically a way to avoid transparency," Institute Assistant Vice President Henry Kerner said in an interview.

It's not just encryption that is raising eyebrows. Republican research firm America Rising filed a FOIA request this month seeking all emails sent by John O'Grady, a top union official at the EPA, that "mentions or refers to President Trump."

The FOIA request came in response to O'Grady's comments to The Washington Post that Trump's decision to firing then-acting Attorney General Sally Yates "sends kind of a chilling effect" through agencies. O'Grady did not respond to a request for comment.

"The public is entitled to know whether career federal government employees are engaged in partisan politics on the taxpayers' dime," said Allan Blutstein, vice president of FOIA operations at America Rising.

EPA employees said they are not using Signal for official government business, and they raised concerns that they're being targeted because they are critical of Trump.

"I don't think anybody can dictate which apps we use on our personal time, for personal conversations," one EPA employee told POLITICO.

The debate comes as employees across the government — political appointees and career officials alike — are increasingly relying on encrypted messaging apps, fearing repercussions if their private conversations are made public.

National security officials have long used encrypted mobile phone software like Signal and WhatsApp to communicate with reporters and other staffers. Signal frequently comes up in articles advising people how they can communicate free of snooping from government officials or hackers, especially following the massive leaks of stolen Democratic Party emails that roiled last year's presidential election.

Trump's appointees have gotten into the act, too: The Washington Post reported this week that administration staff members are using an app called Confide, which deletes messages once they are read, because they're afraid of being accused of leaking to the press. That's also a threat to transparency and accountability, argued Tom Fitton, president of the conservative activist group Judicial Watch, in an interview with POLITICO on Tuesday.

"If they're conducting government business via an application that destroys records, that's a problem that needs to stop," said Fitton, adding that the administration needs to either train its staff on the issue or send them a reminder. He added that the Trump administration is "asking for a lawsuit from either Judicial Watch or someone else if they don't get their act together on these records policies."

Asked if the House Science Committee will pursue a similar probe of White House staffers' use of encrypted messaging apps, spokeswoman Kristina Baum declined to make any commitments. But she said the panel "intends to continue to monitor" cyber issues.

The growing tension across the government has some career employees worried that Republicans will try to make radical changes to laws protecting federal workers — a move that could make people more fearful to speak out against Trump. Trump has already imposed a freeze on most federal hires and has promised to reduce the size of the workforce.

"Frankly, the climate has shifted rather dramatically and we've gone from a chief executive who respects civil servants to a rather bombastic, disdainful chief executive who unfortunately empowers their disparagement," Rep. [Gerry Connolly](#) (D-Va.) said in an interview.

Rep. [Jason Chaffetz](#) (R-Utah), chairman of the House Oversight Committee, is eyeing a major overhaul of the civil service system. He has discussed phasing out pensions for new government employees, instead relying on a defined-contribution plan like a 401(k), and has advocated making it easier to fire problem workers. Chaffetz reportedly talked about some of these issues during a recent meeting with Trump.

Connolly said he's concerned that the Republican Congress could win enough support to move a bill gutting civil service protections. "It is very alarming and I think frankly very destructive in terms of the fabric of a free government and a free society," he said.

In the Senate, lawmakers are also considering changes to civil service laws, but Sen. [James Lankford](#) (R-Okla.) said he is eyeing targeted tweaks that can win bipartisan support, such as efforts to improve the hiring process.

"If we can keep it small and we can keep it targeted, I think we can move it through unanimous consent," said Lankford, who chairs the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's panel on regulatory affairs and federal management. "We need to be better at hiring. If we're better at hiring we don't have to worry about firing."

Alex Guillén and Eric Geller contributed to this story.

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