



*Tropical reefs are chocked full of marine life. (photo: Brian Kenney/shutterstock)*

## White House Eliminates Advisory Boards for Marine Life, Invasive Species

By Miranda Green, The Hill 02 October 19

**T**he Trump administration is disbanding two federal advisory boards focused on protecting marine life and battling invasive species.

As of Tuesday, the government will no longer fund the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee run by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) or the Interior Department's Invasive Species Advisory Committee, the two agencies confirmed.

Both federal advisory panels have been in operation for more than a decade.

The discontinuation the committees as well as the end of the work of the various scientists and academics on them comes as the Trump administration has called for cutting at least one-third of all advisory panels. Monday was the deadline for each agency to comply with the June [executive order](#).

Advisers on the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee were first alerted via email Monday that the council was being disbanded but

were offered no explanation, two scientists on the committee told The Hill.

“Two years ago, when the federal advisory committee was up for renewal, a lot of us thought it would get the ax given the politics of the federal government. When it didn't, we were surprised and glad we had the extra two years,” said Will McClintock a scientist on the council. “Now that it’s been discontinued, I can only guess at the reasons why.”

The panel advises NOAA on ways to strengthen the country's marine protected areas and identify challenges facing them. It was chartered in 2003 under former President George W. Bush.

There are more than 1,700 marine protected areas in the U.S. covering 41 percent of marine waters, which include marine monuments and sanctuaries. President Trump in 2017 issued an executive order asking the Commerce Department to review “future offshore energy potential” at national marine sanctuaries and monuments that had been designated or expanded since 2007.

Separately, former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke [recommended](#) to Trump in January 2018 that three of the national monuments be opened to commercial fishing or reduced in size. No action has been taken.

“Marine protected areas are places where human activities are limited and altogether excluded. And as far as I can tell, that has nothing to do with the Trump administration’s priorities with the extraction of resources including oil,” said McClintock, a project scientist at the Marine Science Institute, part of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

McClintock said papers filed by the committee were hardly controversial. A recently filed document included a toolkit on enhancing conservation at cultural heritage marine sites.

A spokesperson for the Commerce Department said the elimination of the committee followed a “comprehensive review” of all of the agency’s advisory panels “in an effort to use government resources more efficiently” following Trump’s June executive order. The spokesperson would not provide details on other committees cut as a result of Trump’s order.

“As part of the review, Commerce recommended to the Office of Management and Budget that the charter of the Marine Protected Areas Advisory Committee be allowed to expire,” the spokesperson told The Hill in a statement.

“There are several other advisory groups that can assume its responsibilities, and each national marine sanctuary has its own advisory council. Since 2017, this Committee has met only twice in-person and has not convened a single meeting in 2019,” the spokesperson added.

McClintock suggested that the loss of the committee could lead to a focus on the energy industry over conservation.

“To me, the thing that is lost is having a balanced perspective on how ocean resources are used and protected. A committee like this is not interested in supporting one or two sectors like oil and gas or fisheries. We are interested in supporting all sectors in finding out a way to protect and use ocean resources,” he said.

Advisers on Interior’s Invasive Species Advisory Committee (ISAC) found out their charter was ending earlier this year, through a May 2 phone call.

Members of the committee, which has advised on ways to prevent and control invasive species since 1999, were told funding constraints and staff capacity were the reasons for the council’s end, advisers informed The Hill.

According to [minutes of the phone call](#) with Interior's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget Scott Cameron and committee members, Cameron said the decision to cut the advisory council was part of a broader effort between Zinke and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to consider “the collective cost” of federal advisory committees and “evaluate how those funds might be better utilized to address their missions.”

The dialogue suggested there was ongoing scrutiny of federal advisory committees.

Committee members were told that the advisory council was ending because the budget for the National Invasive Species Council (NISC), which oversees the advisory committee, was expected to [be halved](#).

Congress last month passed a continuing resolution that funded NISC’s budget to its full \$1.2 million level.

An Interior spokesperson told The Hill that the panel “was placed in an administratively inactive status.”

“This was based on a decision by NISC leadership given a lack of resources to properly administer” the committee, the spokesperson added.

“To me, it stinks to high heaven,” said Laura Meyerson, an associate professor in the department of natural resources science at the University of Rhode Island, who was a committee member.

“It was not really a very nice call. They said they plan to put ISAC on administratively inactive status based on budget constraints and desire to focus on next management plan,” she said. “It was a really crummy call, and that was the end of it.”

A key function of the council is to oversee efforts to prevent illegal imports at ports of entry of invasive species to the U.S.

Several committee members told The Hill that their recommendations often rubbed agencies the wrong way. Despite being chartered under Interior's authority, their reports often overlapped with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which has the authority to oversee food imports at U.S. ports of entry.

ISAC advisers have regularly suggested that coordination across agencies has been lacking in regard to protecting the spread of unwanted invasive species into the U.S. at ports.

"For a number of years, there has been overt antagonism from some of the invasive species staff at USDA toward the NISC secretariat staff, which was based at Interior," said Ed Clark, president and founder of the Wildlife Center of Virginia.

Over the course of a few years, Clark said, "that antagonism grew to pretty transparent hostility," referencing a spring meeting between USDA staff and members of the committee.

"I am guessing it is not simple coincidence that several of the ISAC white papers on various topics in the last three years repeatedly mentioned that existing federal programs, especially those at USDA, were myopic and largely ineffective in certain areas due to their failure to collaborate with other agencies," Clark added.

The White House's Office of Management and Budget did not provide details on which [committees were slashed](#) under the executive order.

A [May 2 memo](#) written by members of the committee raised concerns that the elimination of the panel would negatively impact the work at NISC.

"Without an external advisory committee providing expert recommendations to nisc, effective nisc-agency policies and programs are at risk in an environment of already heightened and increasing threats and risks from invasive species to human health and welfare, ecosystem stability, food security, and commerce," committee members wrote.

"Current efforts to prevent the importation, establishment, expansion, and impact of invasive species are insufficient to protect the United States from a continuous stream of invasive species, ranging from pathogens, bacteria, plants, and animals," they added.

Clark said he considered the end of the advisory board a "great loss" to the federal government, pointing to the group's final white paper on the role of invasive species in tick-borne illnesses as an example of their important work.

"This was specifically requested by the Defense Department because there is concern that a severe outbreak of tick-borne disease on a military installation could affect force readiness and national security," he said. "The resulting paper has been extremely well-received throughout the public health community and scientific community."

Meyerson pointed to the "power struggle" between Interior and the USDA over the committee, saying she felt it was constantly stepping on agencies' toes.

A USDA spokesperson denied the accusations. An Interior spokesperson said the agency, in consultation with the USDA, "found that the public input provided previously by the Invasive Species Advisory Committee could be accomplished through other methods."

Meyerson, however, said she believed the panel was nixed because it never had a champion.

"I think it's probably easy pickings," she said. "It's a little committee that probably nobody was paying attention to. It was probably easy for people on the lower rungs to get rid of it."