Brown: Coal rule rollback shortchanges treasury, lands and economy

Saturday, July 29, 2017 5:03 AM

Todd Brown

Public lands are the fabric that hold the West and our mountain communities together, and what draws people to small towns like Telluride.

Since his confirmation as secretary of the Department of the Interior, Ryan Zinke has worked to support extractive industries over outdoor recreation and conservation on national public lands. Zinke’s recent recommendation to shrink the borders of the newly designated Bears Ears National Monument in Utah would open up large swaths of land for development, overlooking the need to conserve cultural and scientific resources.

This raises concerns about the department’s ability to properly manage public lands and natural resources for communities surrounded by, and dependent on, these lands. As a Telluride town council member, and longtime ski instructor at Telluride Ski & Golf, I am intimately aware of the importance of a well-managed public lands system to our community. We rely on a healthy, well-managed public lands system to attract tourists, businesses and residents. Allowing the development of coal to proceed as the Administration intends, while continuing to shortchange taxpayers, is a surefire way to destroy these precious resources.

On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to discuss this topic at a meeting at the Interior Department with staff in the office of the secretary. Unfortunately, it is clear that the department’s leadership does not see things the same way.
The department under the Obama Administration and Secretary Jewell developed common-sense reforms to outdated rules and regulations covering coal mining on public lands. One of the most important rules, which should have taken effect in March, closed a loophole that would stop the exploitation of taxpayer-owned national public lands. Over the past 30 years, the government’s undervaluation of coal mined on national public lands may have cost taxpayers upward of $30 billion in lost revenue.

However, in late February, the new Interior Department led by Zinke, illegally halted the rule. This rule is critical to closing the loopholes and revising the valuation method needed to ensure coal companies pay their fair share to American taxpayers. By eliminating subsidies and requiring coal companies to pay royalties on the true market price of coal, the government will collect a fair return for U.S. taxpayers and western states (an estimated $1 billion per year), and increase government transparency and efficiency.

The staying of this rule, along with the department’s interest in development of public lands for extractive industries, puts our communities at risk.

In nearby Gunnison County, a proposed coal mine expansion into a roadless area has been pushed forward by President Trump, threatening the area’s biodiversity, beauty and air quality.

If coal, oil and gas companies are allowed to continue developing our public lands without paying their fair share in royalties in the absence of common sense safeguards for our air, land and water, local communities lose out on much-needed revenue. The public lands that fuel our economies and sustain our residents’ way of life also will be harmed.

While towns like mine all over the country are struggling to adapt to climate change, coal companies continue to pay royalties that are out of balance with the real costs to the outdoors. Appropriate royalty payments would encourage all forms of energy and should be used to improve schools and roads or build bridges.

Our communities deserve their fair share of the return on resources we all own. Trump and Zinke would be wise to heed local calls to examine our federal coal program and fix it once and for all.

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Originally available at:

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