

Anna Peterson: Reviewing Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's first year in office

By Anna Peterson

POSTED: 03/17/2018 07:50:50 PM MDT



Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke testifies before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last week in Washington, D.C. (*Win McNamee / Getty Images North America*)

We recently passed the one-year mark since Ryan Zinke became Secretary of the Interior. Over that year Zinke has been busy dismantling environmental protections for public lands, calling for not just energy independence, but what the Trump administration is calling "energy dominance." Much of this deregulation has disregarded voices from mountain communities that rely on healthy, well-managed public lands for economic stability, outdoor recreation, and cultural vitality.

The Trump administration, Secretary Zinke, and many in Congress have made it clear that their top priority for America's public lands is to use them for mining and fossil-fuel drilling. This focus comes despite the requirement that public lands are supposed to be managed for

multiple uses. That means that the agency he runs is legally required to also manage for activities such as camping, mountain biking, hunting, and fishing, as well as conserving our pristine lands and wildlife for future generations to enjoy. This overall focus on energy development not only disregards common sense environmental safeguards, but also disrespects voices from mountain communities while putting at risk the \$887 billion outdoor recreation economy that bolsters the viability of our communities.

Advertisement

As a longtime resident of mountain towns in the West, I have seen firsthand the economic and social benefits that outdoor recreation on public lands brings our communities. However, when they are managed with only "energy dominance" in mind, the way of life that I and my neighbors know and love is in peril.

Large swaths of national public lands are being tied up by oil and gas companies, limiting the use of this land by American taxpayers. When oil wells, roads, and power lines dominate a landscape the place becomes single-use, not multiple-use as intended. On a recent outing with my family to search for sandstone arches near my home, I encountered such a single-use landscape devoted to energy dominance. Noise, fumes, heavy truck traffic, and an endless maze of service roads showed me what "energy dominance" can look like in my own backyard.

Some places are appropriate to develop fossil fuels but others need to be left as they are. After all, multiple-use does not mean every use on every acre. Many of us in mountain towns are concerned that Secretary Zinke's "energy dominance" will tilt the scales too heavily toward exploitation, and away from the fresh air, open spaces, and clean water that make living where we do so special.

Even before Secretary Zinke arrived on the scene to shift the balance, low royalty rates and fire-sale prices for oil and gas leases have been shortchanging American taxpayers. Most people have no idea that the minimum bid for a lease is just \$2.00 an acre — and many sell for just that. Once a lease is secured, a company can hold onto that lease for 10 years without even drilling. This has led to out-of-control speculation, with millions of acres leased but not yet actually drilled.

Reforms are necessary. If royalty rates were raised on public lands to reflect values on state and private lands, taxpayers could see an increase in revenue of \$400 million over the next 10 years. Likewise, if rental rates and minimum bids were raised, taxpayers could see an additional \$500 million benefit.

National public lands are meant to be open to all Americans, not just the oil and gas industry, and they must be managed in a way that supports multiple uses while ensuring taxpayers are getting a fair deal from energy development.

Secretary Zinke has spent his first year tearing down environmental protections while cutting the public out of decision making, and we need a major course correction in the years to come. Secretary Zinke has said he wants to be a good neighbor to Western communities, and we're going to hold him to his word. It's time for his actions to match his rhetoric — the future of our families, communities, and our public lands depend on it.

Anna Peterson is executive director of The Mountain Pact, an organization that works with mountain communities across the American West to build resilience in the face of economic and environmental stresses. She lives in Durango.

--

Originally available at:

http://www.dailycamera.com/guest-opinions/ci_31740681/anna-peterson-reviewing-interior-secretary-ryan-zinkes-first