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OPINION

OPINION COLUMNISTS

Department of the Interior agenda threatening Coloradans way of life

The department's energy dominance agenda is prioritizing extractive industries at the expense of state's thriving outdoor economy.



FRISCO, CO – SEPTEMBER 12: The sun rises over Dillon Reservoir on September 12, 2018 in Frisco, Colorado. Colorado is experiencing extreme drought that is drawing down reservoirs and headwater levels across the state. (Photo by RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post)

By **HUNTER MORTENSON** | Guest Commentary

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The town of Frisco is a short drive from six of Colorado's famous ski resorts. Along with world class ski and winter recreation opportunities, Frisco offers unbeatable access to summer hiking, biking, camping, fishing, rafting and more. Access to outdoor recreation on public lands in Colorado's high peaks is what draws approximately 90,000-100,000 annual visitors to our town and provides a special way of life for our year-round residents.

However, this way of life is threatened by the Department of Interior's energy dominance agenda that is prioritizing extractive industries. This one-sided approach to DOI's multiple use mandate is negatively impacting our thriving outdoor economy, the interests of mountain community residents, visitors, and the ecological needs of our public lands.

As mayor pro tem, ski patroller, avalanche forecaster, and longtime resident of Frisco, I have seen the increase in visitation from tourism and have also experienced changes in seasonal snowfall and snowmelt. Earlier snowmelt can occur because of increased temperatures, but also because of dust on snow events which occur when huge quantities of dust, often from human causes, blow in during spring storms and cause the snow to melt 1-4 weeks early, severely impacting our winter tourism. This also impacts spring and summer runoff that agriculture and summer tourism depends upon. This windblown desert dust is increasing in quantities and regularity due to human activities such as energy extraction and exploration on public lands. Increases in oil and gas exploration is detrimental to Frisco and other mountain communities in Colorado that experience the same dust on snow events.

In September, I submitted comments to the Royalty Policy Committee concerning Trump administration proposals that I feel would once again put oil and gas interests ahead of the interests of mountain communities. The RPC met for the fourth time since it was established by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to review and recommend rules regarding fair valuation of resources produced on public lands. Stacked with oil and gas representatives and reflecting a complete absence of any other interest groups — despite repeated requests to join — the RPC has followed a singular agenda, pushing policies that benefit industry at the expense of taxpayers and communities such as Frisco.

The RPC continues to enact a long list of industry wishes, which are now culminating in full force in the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's recent September and upcoming December oil and gas lease sales; 2.9 million publicly owned acres (and counting) — more than offered at any point in history — are on the chopping block. The committee has reversed and moved forward policies that enable oil and gas operators to circumvent critical environmental analyses and ignore public input on matters directly related to their economic vitality and quality of life. Without sufficient planning and analyses (and using extensive taxpayer resources), more than 80 percent of acres offered by this administration have not sold, and of those that did, nearly 25 percent sold for the minimum bid of \$2 per acre. America's public lands are worth far more.

This recent meeting was nothing if not a reminder that this administration and Secretary Zinke, under the auspices of the Interior and the RPC, are prioritizing the oil and gas industry over mountain communities through the poor management of our public lands. Our snowpack, spring run-off, as well as community's economic sustainability and cultural vitality is at risk if RPC continues to ignore the voices of mountain communities and the American people.

Frisco Mayor pro tem Hunter Mortenson is a Frisco native and earns a living as an avalanche technician working to mitigate and manage avalanche hazards.