Secretary Zinke Resigns From the Department of Interior

On Saturday, December 15, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke resigned amidst numerous ethics investigations after losing White House support. Secretary Zinke has been instrumental in implementing President Trump and his administration's 'energy dominance' agenda by streamlining and expanding oil and gas leasing and drilling operations on public lands. Secretary Zinke and his Interior Department have rolled back common-sense environmental safeguards, and time and again ignored voices from mountain communities that rely on healthy, well-managed public lands for economic stability, outdoor recreation, and cultural vitality.

Ryan Zinke faces 18 investigations relating to his travel, business dealings, and policy decisions while serving as Secretary of the Interior. The investigations include: the Secretary’s use of taxpayer funds for private flights and a real estate deal that would benefit both him and Halliburton Chairman David J. Lesar. In October, following the referral of this land deal investigation to the Justice Department, Secretary Zinke lost the support of the White House and was urged to resign.

Although he had at one time claimed to be a Teddy Roosevelt conservationist, Secretary Zinke proved the opposite during his tenure. In 2017, the Secretary recommended massive reductions to the size of four National Monuments, which resulted in the largest reduction in public lands protection in U.S. history. Along with this, he relaxed many Obama era environmental regulations such as the BLM Methane Waste Prevention Rule, and has worked to reduce public involvement in oil and gas leasing, and remove protections from 9 million acres of critical sage-grouse habitat.

Many of us in mountain towns see that Secretary Zinke’s 'energy dominance' agenda has tilted the scales too heavily toward exploitation, putting the American people at risk. Our federal lands produce nearly 25% of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States. In the Western U.S., we are already experiencing decreased snowpack, increased drought, as well as lengthening and intensifying fire seasons, all of which will get even worse if
we continue to abuse our public lands at current rates.

Secretary Zinke is likely to be replaced, at least temporarily, by former oil lobbyist and current deputy Secretary David Bernhardt. Mr. Bernhardt has been instrumental in many rollbacks of public lands protections, including the recently released sage-grouse plan. This replacement is cause for concern and could lead to the continued mismanagement of our public lands. We urge Mr. Bernhardt to be a good neighbor to Western communities – to steer away from 'energy dominance', to listen to and respect voices from mountain communities, and to minimize threats to clean air, water, natural areas, wildlife, and wild places that make our communities so special. The future of our families, communities, and our public lands depend on it.