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Daines praises Interior nominee; public lands advocates “disheartened”

President Donald Trump on Monday announced his intention to nominate former energy lobbyist David Bernhardt as his new secretary of Interior.

Monday’s nomination was praised by Montana Sen. Steve Daines, who called Bernhardt a “great pick.” It also drew quick criticism from public lands advocates across the state and the West.

“We’re disheartened,” said Anna Peterson, executive director of The Mountain Pact. “We have been deeply troubled by Bernhardt’s and the Trump administration’s actions and directions on public lands, climate and many conservation issues.”

Bernhardt served as deputy secretary under Ryan Zinke, who stepped down last year after he became embroiled in scandal and numerous alleged ethics violations. The new nominee is generally expected to continue Trump’s efforts to increase fossil fuel production and open more public lands to drilling and mining.

Trump praised Bernhardt on Twitter, saying he “has done a fantastic job from the day he arrived.” Daines agreed, posting his own reaction on Twitter after the president’s announcement.

“Great pick!” Daines tweeted. “(Bernhardt) understands the importance of access to our public lands, responsible energy development and our trust responsibility to Tribal Nations.”

Public lands advocates who criticized Zinke during his tenure disagreed with Daines’ haste to back the president’s nominee. Among other things, they pointed to Bernhardt’s ties to the coal industry, where he once worked as a lobbyist.

Those watching the post fear Bernhardt will put the interest of oil and gas, mining and other extraction industries ahead of public lands. Bernhardt must win confirmation of the Senate.

“(His) nomination is an affront to America’s parks and public lands,” said Jennifer Rokala, executive director of the Center for Western Priorities. “As an oil and gas lobbyist, Bernhardt pushed to open vast swaths of public lands for drilling and mining. As deputy secretary, he was behind some of the worst policy decisions of Secretary Zinke’s sad tenure, including stripping protections for imperiled wildlife.”

As reactions came to Monday’s announcement, Montana Conservation Voters released the results of a poll weighing Zinke’s job performance during his tenure as Interior secretary, with 53 percent expressing an unfavorable opinion.

Several factors played into Zinke’s poor showing in his home state, including his push to reduce the size of national monuments, his stripping of endangered species protections, and his many alleged ethics violations.

“Montanans are deeply disappointed in Ryan Zinke’s failure to follow through on promises of protecting our public lands and natural resources,” said Rick Potts, executive director of the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund. “Montanans treasure our landscapes and are sending a clear message to other public officials: Act for the public interest because we’ll hold you accountable if you fall short.”