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Opinion | Mortensen: Trump's troubling nominee threatens public lands

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Guest column

Who is Acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt? Since Ryan Zinke was ousted from the Interior Department in December, Bernhardt has been Acting Secretary of the Interior, and now, he's President Donald Trump's nominee to be Secretary of the Interior. His nomination will come before the U.S. Senate in the coming weeks and Coloradans need both Sens. Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner to oppose his nomination. Here's why.

While Bernhardt grew up in Colorado, he long ago traded in his Colorado roots to be a Washington, D.C. insider — cycling between stints as a lobbyist for big oil and gas companies and behind-the-scenes roles in Congress, and for Presidents Bush and Trump. He has been instrumental in pushing the Trump administration's "energy dominance" agenda — where the administration has handed over hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands to oil and gas companies for drilling while removing public involvement.

Acting behind the scenes, Bernhardt and the Department of the Interior rolled back rational environmental safeguards on methane pollution, proposed to remove protections from 9 million acres of critical sage grouse habitat and executed massive reductions to the size of two national monuments, which resulted in the largest reduction in public lands protection in U.S. history. During the government shutdown when our country's public lands and national parks were being destroyed, Bernhardt recalled furloughed employees to only accelerate oil and gas lease approvals, not care for our public lands.

As a former coal lobbyist and throughout his tenure, Bernhardt has continuously put the interests of oil and gas companies first, minimizing all other uses of public lands that support our mountain communities. Bernhardt's numerous conflicts of interest will mean he manages public lands for the benefit of oil, gas and coal companies rather than the American public.

Many of us in mountain towns like Frisco see that the administration's energy dominance agenda has tilted the scales too heavily toward exploitation, putting the American people at risk. Our federal lands produce nearly 25 percent 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. These actions directly affect the safety and economic well-being of mountain towns across the West.

Simply put — David Bernhardt's record mismanaging our national parks and public lands disqualifies him from being Secretary of the Interior. I am deeply disappointed that Sen. Gardner has already announced he will support Bernhardt's nomination despite the damage done by this administration to Colorado's air, land and water. Sen. Bennet, we need you to stand up to this administration's attacks on our public lands and oppose the nomination of David Bernhardt to Secretary of the Interior.

Hunter Mortensen is Mayor Pro Tem of the town of Frisco.