DOI Disbands the Royalty Policy Committee Amidst Controversy

At the end of April 2019, the Royalty Policy Committee (RPC) was disbanded by the Department of Interior (DOI). The industry-focused committee was re-chartered in March 2017 by former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and was tasked with ensuring that taxpayers were getting fair compensation for energy extraction on public lands. However, a Wilderness Society analysis found that 72% of decisions made by the RPC did exactly the opposite by sacrificing the environment and cutting the public out of decision-making. The RPC had been under scrutiny and in August 2018, a lawsuit was brought against then-Secretary Zinke for a lack of transparency as well as unbalanced, industry heavy representation on the committee.

The controversial committee made many decisions that short-changed taxpayers to advance the agenda of extractive industries. Many conservation and ethics organizations believe that the lawsuit is what led to the eventual dissolution of the committee.

Since former Secretary Zinke re-chartered the group, The Mountain Pact was involved in voicing concerns around the RPC through a report, policy alerts, a letter, and media coverage. The committee held public meetings four times to receive input on proposed policy changes. During the September 2018 meeting in Denver, Hunter Mortensen, Mayor Pro Tem of Frisco, CO prepared to comment on behalf of his community and others like it that suffer from the unfair valuation of energy extracted from public lands. Energy resources extracted from public lands are sold well below the value of those extracted from state or private lands, and close to 25% of leases are sold for the minimum price of $2/acre. These prices severely shortchange taxpayers and further the Trump administration's 'energy dominance' agenda with disregard for other, less impactful uses of public lands.

The RPC was yet another avenue for the energy industry to advance their agenda through public lands management. The RPC's charter expired on April 21, and it is still unclear if current Interior Secretary Bernhardt will re-instate the committee's charter.