

Trump administration expands leasing for oil, gas, coal extraction

Patrick Martin
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While more than one million people were marching to demand action on climate change on Friday, the Trump administration was finalizing plans to greatly expand the leasing of public lands for oil, gas and coal extraction, as well as hinting that oil drilling off the Atlantic Coast is the next goal in its drive to promote fossil fuels.

The Department of the Interior chose Friday, March 16, during the Youth Climate Strike—international protests over climate change—to announce that it was lifting protections for the greater sage grouse, a bird native only to the United States, on nearly 9 million acres in the western states, in order to expand leasing of land to the oil, gas and mining industries.

Since Trump took office, the Interior Department has offered some 16.8 million acres of federal land for oil and gas leasing, with 2.3 million acres leased and an auction set for an additional 1.3 million acres in the spring. The total made available is larger than the state of West Virginia.

Of the estimated 160 million acres in 11 states that are native habitat for the sage grouse, 67 million acres were designated for protection in 2015 under a plan to stave off the bird's placement on the endangered species list. The Trump administration has now relaxed protections on three-quarters of the area originally set aside.

The expanded oil, gas and mining lease plan was announced by the acting interior secretary, David Bernhardt, the former oil industry lobbyist who replaced Ryan Zinke after a series of corruption scandals involving the former congressman, who resigned in December.

The decision was denounced by environmental advocates as a giveaway to big polluters and the fossil fuel industry. The Natural Resources Defense Council

issued a statement declaring that the interior secretary “is unraveling a painstakingly crafted conservation plan and putting massive swaths of land, hundreds of species and precious wildlife habitat at risk.” The NRDC added, “This shameless giveaway to the oil and gas industry has no basis in science.”

Brian Rutledge, director of Audubon Society's Sagebrush Ecosystem Initiative, said in a statement, “What earned its place as the most hopeful conservation success story in American history has suffered a grave setback that threatens not only the greater sage grouse, but also the entire sagebrush ecosystem.”

Also benefiting from the lifting of restrictions are big ranching interests throughout the western states, including Oregon, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Nevada and Northeastern California. In Oregon, for example, 13 areas set aside by the Bureau of Land Management to provide habitat for the sage grouse will now be open for cattle grazing.

At least one prominent Democrat, Colorado Governor Jared Polis, hailed the Trump administration action, saying the Interior Department had worked to address the concerns of state officials. The multi-millionaire business executive, one of the richest men in Congress before his election as governor last November, said, “Our focus now turns to implementation and creating successful outcomes on the ground.”

Under the now-disgraced Zinke, the Interior Department began rolling back the protection plan for the greater sage grouse early in 2017, beginning with changes on the website of the Bureau of Land Management, deleting information on the sage grouse and even pages describing what various states were doing to promote its habitat and ensure the bird's long-term survival.

More than 40,000 people and organizations have submitted objections to the Department of the Interior over the efforts to downgrade and ultimately abandon protection of the sage grouse.

Last June, 20 scientists sent a letter to then-Secretary Zinke warning that “The sage-grouse is an indicator species for health of the interior West’s sagebrush steppe ecosystem... and healthy sagebrush habitats not only support over 350 plant and animal species, including some of America’s most iconic species of wildlife, but are essential for economic sustainability of human communities in the western US. Today, sage grouse are present in just over half their historical range, the number of males counted each spring for the majority of populations across the range of the species has declined since the 1960s...”

These concerns have been brushed aside in the effort to boost the profits of the big oil, gas and coal mining companies.

Another pro-oil decision is coming soon, according to the Interior Department’s assistant secretary for land and minerals management, Joe Balash, who told an oil industry conference in Houston last month that the Trump administration would likely open portions of the Atlantic coastal shelf to oil and gas drilling, over the opposition of the states involved.

He told the International Association of Geophysical Contractors that the proposal would probably come through in the second quarter of 2019. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is currently reviewing permit applications for seismic testing in nine areas from Delaware to Florida. Seismic testing is a first step in locating recoverable oil and gas deposits.

During a question and answer session after his remarks, he told the contractors, “I will tell you, we wouldn’t work really, really hard to get seismic permits out if that area wasn’t going to be available.”



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