



The Interior Secretary, one of President Trump's most loyal allies, sees public lands as the key to an 'energy-dominant' future. (photo: Morgan Rachel Levy/Redux)

Ryan Zinke's Great American Fire Sale

By Carolyn Kormann, The New Yorker, 25 April 18

Not long ago, the Bureau of Land Management, an agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior, began distributing “vision cards” to its employees. The front of each card features the B.L.M. logo (a river winding into green foothills); short descriptions of the Bureau’s “vision,” “mission,” and “values”; and an oil rig. On the flip side is a list of “guiding principles,” accompanied by an image of two cowboys riding across a golden plain. Amber Cargile, a B.L.M. spokeswoman, told me that the new cards are meant to reflect the agency’s “multiple-use mission on working landscapes across the West, which includes grazing, energy, timber, mining, recreation, and many other programs.” Individual employees, she added, can opt to wear or display the cards at their own discretion. But, according to the advocacy group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which obtained photos of the cards and [shared them with the Washington Post](#), supervisors in at least two B.L.M. field offices have been verbally “advising that employees must clip them to their lanyards.” Some workers, speaking to the *Post* anonymously, said that they felt they had no choice but to comply.

Since last March, when Ryan Zinke assumed leadership of the Interior Department, vacating Montana’s lone seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, this sort of ideological conformity has been a top priority. On Wednesday, the department’s Office of Inspector General released a report finding that, between June and October of last year, Zinke reassigned twenty-seven senior officials [without reason or adequate warning](#). Many of them “questioned whether these reassignments were political or punitive,” the report states, “or believed their reassignment may have been related to their prior work assignments, including climate change, energy, or conservation.” (In response, [Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt said](#) that the department will continue to use “reassignments robustly as a management tool.”) In some B.L.M. field offices, posters depicting conservation landmarks, such as a federally protected red-rock canyon, have been swapped out for ones showing a towering black coal bed and a yellow haul truck. One Interior Department official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fear of reprisal, said that the agency had discontinued its program of making conservation posters publicly available. The new ones are strictly internal—“for employee morale,” the source said, with evident irony.

Barely three weeks after Zinke took office, President Trump issued an executive order aimed at “[promoting energy independence and economic growth](#),” in which he directed the Interior Secretary to “suspend, revise, or rescind” any guidelines that imposed “regulatory burdens” on the oil, natural-gas, and mining industries. Zinke, a former Navy SEAL who raised money for his congressional campaign by raffling off an AR-15 painted with the stars and stripes, seemed keen to carry out the President’s order, but he initially encountered some resistance. In a speech to the National Petroleum Council last September, Zinke claimed that a third of the career civil servants under his command were “[not loyal to the flag](#),” by which he meant Trump. He compared his department to a group of pirates who capture “a prized ship at sea and only the captain and the first mate row over” to get the job done. The vision cards, it appears, were meant to remind B.L.M. employees that their main responsibility is not to keep the prized ship afloat but to plunder it for all the fossil fuels, ore, and grazing rights it’s worth.

Zinke isn’t the first Interior Secretary to see this as the agency’s proper function, but he has been more aggressive than his predecessors at implementing his agenda. So far, he and Trump have eliminated two million acres from the nation’s protected areas, and offered another 11.6 million acres of largely wild public lands to oil-and-gas prospectors. (Zinke also proposed raising entrance fees at some national parks by forty dollars or more, arguing that too many people—“[elderly, fourth-graders, veterans, disabled](#)”—get in at a discount or for free. After widespread protest, he [announced](#) this week that his department would raise the fee by five dollars.) The [most substantial wholesale cuts](#) have been in southern Utah, where Trump shrunk Bears Ears National Monument by eighty-five per cent and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by half. Both monuments were originally protected by Democratic Presidents—Bears Ears, in 2016, by Barack Obama; Grand Staircase, in 1996, by Bill Clinton—and it isn’t yet clear whether Trump has the constitutional authority to reverse their directives. What is clear, though, is why he did it. According to internal agency documents [obtained by the Times](#), the decision was driven by the potential for oil, coal, gas, and uranium exploration within the monuments’ borders. A month before Zinke announced plans to

review the status of roughly thirty national monuments, inviting the public to comment, he was in touch with Utah’s congressional delegation about the parts of Bears Ears that could be developed. In the end, the monument’s new boundaries were an almost exact match for what the Utahns wanted.

At the same time, Zinke has revamped the B.L.M.’s oil-and-gas leasing process to make it more industry-friendly. In January, the agency issued new guidelines scrapping many of the reforms that the Obama Administration had enacted. According to Steve Bloch, the legal director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, those reforms emphasized a “think first, lease later” approach, designed to account for the competing claims of local and national stakeholders—politicians, environmentalists, energy companies, hunters, [tribal groups](#), and so on. The new process, Bloch told me, is “intended to offer as many parcels as possible on as fast a schedule as possible.” Under Zinke, the land nominated for leasing no longer requires a pre-sale environmental assessment. The Interior Department official said that the B.L.M. “is pushing us to authorize lease sales in a way that doesn’t trigger the same level of public involvement.” The source added, “We’re gonna get our asses handed to us in court.” In Bloch’s estimation, Zinke’s changes return the B.L.M. to the “‘drill here, drill now’ days of the Bush Administration.”

George W. Bush was no friend of the environment, but he could justify his policies, to some extent, on economic grounds. In the early years of his Presidency, the domestic natural-gas supply was sinking and the country was reliant on imported fuel. Bush sought to boost production by auctioning off leases on millions of acres of public land. Since then, the energy sector has changed. Fracking on mostly private lands in the Permian Basin, in Texas, and the Bakken Formation, in North Dakota, has led to an energy surplus. These days, the industry seems to lack serious interest in new oil-and-gas leases on federal lands, which have a “[higher break-even price](#),” according to Kathleen Sgamma, the president of the Western Energy Alliance, a Denver-based trade group. (Sgamma, a longtime critic of Obama’s reforms, now sits on the Interior Department’s Royalty Policy Committee.) Last December, the B.L.M. offered leases on 10.3 million acres in the Alaskan Arctic, a sale [that the Trump Administration](#)

touted as the largest in U.S. history. Less than one per cent of the land received bids. In March, the agency tried again, this time with fifteen thousand parcels in the Gulf of Mexico. Although Zinke advertised the auction as a “bellwether” for America’s “energy-dominant” future, barely a tenth of the parcels received bids.

Elsewhere, Zinke’s great American fire sale has met with more success. In late March, the B.L.M. sold leases on fifty thousand acres of public land in southeastern Utah, over the protests of tribal leaders, conservationists, and, most notable, another agency within the Interior Department—the [National Park Service](#). Some of the parcels are located within a few miles of the original boundaries of Bears Ears; others are adjacent to Hovenweep, a national monument containing the ruins of six prehistoric Native American villages. In 2015, under Obama, the B.L.M. offered up many of the same parcels for lease, then deferred the auction, noting the need for a closer analysis of the land’s cultural, archeological, and ecological value before development could begin. Under the new Administration, the agency changed course, arguing that the analysis could take place once the bidders put forth their drilling proposals. (In a statement, the B.L.M.’s Utah director, Ed Roberson, said that the agency had “worked diligently with the National Park Service” and “went ahead with the lease sale after resolving their concerns.”)

Across Utah and other Western states, there is a huge surplus of leased but undeveloped oil-and-gas parcels. Right now, the Interior Department source told me, the land sold in March shows little potential for lucrative development. So why did the industry bid on it? Bloch suggested two possible reasons. First, he said, companies sometimes stockpile leases because it looks good to their investors: in theory, more assets mean more reserves, which mean more profit down the road. (Never mind that the reserves may not actually exist.) Second, some buyers purchase undesirable leases with the hope of unloading them when better extraction technologies or a needier market increase their value. In March, Bloch said, “that was borne out by looking at who showed up for the lease sale—wildcatters, speculators, unknowns.” The largest buyer, Ayers Energy, [has no record of bidding](#) on public lands in the West in recent years.

Bloch’s comments raise another question: If the leased land isn’t going to be developed anyway, why shouldn’t the government make some money from all that unused space? Isn’t that a win-win? Absolutely not, Bloch and Nada Culver, the Wilderness Society’s senior counsel, told me. Once the land is leased, they noted, the B.L.M. has a legal obligation to see that it delivers what the lessee wants. In addition, the agency most often sells its leases without any stipulation preventing surface occupancy, meaning that some development—clearing brush, building roads, drilling wells—may occur. Once that happens, any possibility of using the land for conservation or recreation, or preserving it because it is sacred to local tribal groups, goes out the window. In other words, Trump and Zinke are using “energy independence and economic growth” to justify the sale of lands that are unlikely to provide either. “These are high-risk areas,” Culver said, referring not just to the land that was leased in March but to all of southeastern Utah’s red-rock country. “To be gambling with this place simply to make a statement of principle is profoundly disturbing.”