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Opinion: David Bernhardt's scrapping of sage grouse plans is wrong for Colorado and the West

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As a proud Coloradan, I care deeply about what happens to our public lands, our waterways and the wildlife that depend on them. Protection of our magnificent outdoors is essential to the Colorado way of life.

Unfortunately, we are now under national leadership that may not care as much about many of these values.

Consider the current plight of the imperiled sage grouse, whose habitat spans 10 western states, including Colorado.

When years of neglecting the sage grouse led to a near Endangered Species Act listing, an unprecedented collaborative effort ensued in which federal agencies worked with states, conservationists, sportsmen, ranchers, business owners,

elected officials and oil and gas industry representatives to protect millions of acres of habitat and save the bird.

Western states and federal officials approved the plans to reverse the bird's decline in 2015, leading U.S. Fish and Wildlife to determine the sage grouse was no longer endangered. All seemed to be coming together after years of careful consideration, but with the advent of the Trump administration in 2017, it all began to unravel.

Former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke quickly announced the abandonment of the well-thought-out plans, but it was David Bernhardt as Deputy Secretary who oversaw the controversial revisions.

Finally, on March 15, Bernhardt, as Acting Secretary, undercut protections from some nine million acres of sage-grouse habitat, which would make more land available for oil and gas drilling.

He is now nominated by President Trump to take over as Secretary of Interior, which does not bode well for those of us who care about protection for our public lands, water and wildlife habitat.

Mr. Bernhardt, a native of Colorado's Western Slope, has spent the bulk of his career as an attorney lobbying for fossil fuel companies or at the Interior Department working to promote policies that favor his former energy industry clients.

Not only has he been the driving force behind rolling back protections for the sage grouse, he has eased regulations on methane emissions for oil and gas companies.

As a top Interior Department official in the Bush administration, he led the charge for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Most recently, as Deputy Secretary, he was behind offering oil and gas leases on millions of acres of public lands, including next to national parks, national monuments and national historic sites.

He played an important role in the reduction of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments, undermining years of collaborative protective efforts.

What is perhaps most striking is that Bernhardt's policies favoring energy interests are in complete opposition to the Western values we live by.

According to the 2019 Colorado College State of the Rockies Conservation in the West Poll, nearly two-thirds of Western voters advocate that Congress ensure protections for “sources of clean water, air quality, and wildlife habitat while providing opportunities to visit and recreate on our national public lands.” Fewer than one-in-four place the emphasis on domestic energy production.

By more than a two-to-one margin, voters in the West also say that “allowing increased oil and gas production on 80 percent of the ‘critical habitat’ that western states had identified in 2015 in order to try and restore the threatened sage grouse” is a bad policy change.

The stripping back of sage-grouse habitat protections is not only alarming, but counterproductive. With the rollbacks, the bird could easily wind up on the endangered species list, which would have devastating consequences for our outdoor economy as well as our agriculture and oil and gas sectors.

I and so many other concerned Coloradans call on Mr. Bernhardt to modify his skewed policies of supporting energy interests over science-backed conservation values, and act with the necessary impartiality that overrides his career-long ties to the oil and gas industry.

What he’s doing now with sage-grouse conservation and other Interior decisions is short-sighted. Ultimately, the interests of business and profit-making cannot be elevated above those of the earth and its environment on which they depend.

Corinne Platt is the mayor of Ophir. She has lived and recreated in Ophir and Telluride for more than 30 years, where she pursues her passions for writing and finding solutions to environmental issues in the West.

