

Americans need better management of public lands, fair returns on resources | Devon Reese

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This opinion column was submitted by Devon Reese, the at-large Reno city councilmember.

The past year has been like no other in recent history. Whether you're young or old, live in the east or west, COVID-19 has dramatically impacted our lives and communities. Reno, the largest city in Northern Nevada, where I was born and raised and now serve on the City Council, faced challenges unlike any we have ever seen before.

COVID-19 has highlighted for all of us the critical importance of our public lands. They are the foundation for Reno's vital outdoor recreation economy; provide clean water, clean air, recreation opportunities including fishing, hunting,

hiking and birdwatching; and moderate the impacts of climate change by capturing and storing carbon in roots, plants and soils.

With fossil fuel extraction on our public lands producing one-quarter of our country's carbon emissions and the intensifying twin crises of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, it's increasingly clear that we need to take action now. That's why I applaud President Biden's ambitious and whole government approach to tackling these challenges and his commitment to protecting 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. I support his executive order that pauses new oil and gas leases on public lands to allow for the administration to assess how to bring the antiquated oil and gas leasing program into the 21st century — a review that is long overdue.

The current noncompetitive bidding system has led to rampant oil and gas company speculation while outdated royalty rates and lease fees have meant the American taxpayer has been deprived of a fair return on these lands for far too long. In fact, a report issued in 2020 documented that from 2010 to 2019, the federal government lost up to \$12.4 billion in revenue from oil and gas drilling on federal lands because of the terribly outdated royalty rate originally established in 1920.

To address these issues in concert with the administration's review of the public lands oil and gas leasing program, our Nevada senators have introduced two pieces of legislation. Senator Jacky Rosen and Iowa Republican Senator Chuck Grassley have introduced the Fair Returns for Public Lands Act to increase from 12.5 percent to 18.75 percent the royalties oil and gas companies pay for the resources they extract from our public lands, and increase the rental fees that oil and gas companies pay from \$1.50 or \$2.00 per acre to \$3.00 or \$5.00 per acre. It will also make it harder for oil and gas company speculators to continue to tie up millions of acres for drilling, which prevents these lands from being managed for other important purposes such as conservation or recreation. These proposed changes will result in more revenues to fund critical infrastructure, education and public health projects.

Senator Catherine Cortez Masto has introduced the End Speculative Oil and Gas Leasing Act, which will reduce the ability of oil and gas development companies to stockpile public lands that have little to no potential for drilling through a process with little transparency; focus development efforts on areas that have higher development potential; incentivize more appropriate land-use management; and conserve vulnerable habitats. Unfortunately, the noncompetitive leasing program is particularly active in Nevada where, since 2009, the Bureau of Land Management has sold more than two million acres of low mineral potential. With most of these noncompetitive leases sitting idle, the bottom line is that it's time to end this opaque program that wastes resources and shortchanges the American taxpayer. This proposed legislation will only apply to future lease sales and won't impact sites already under production or lands already leased.

Just as I'm cautiously optimistic that we're turning the corner with the pandemic, I'm also encouraged by the Biden administration's and our senators' commitment to aligning the management of our public lands with forward looking climate, clean energy and conservation goals. These meaningful reforms will ensure that our public lands are managed in the public interest and taxpayers finally earn a fair return on their natural resources.

Devon Reese is the at-large Reno City Councilmember re-elected in 2020. Reese was born and raised in the Reno area. He is an avid outdoorsman, enjoys travel, competitive tennis and the arts. Outside of his Council position, Reese is a local attorney and primarily practices in the area of civil litigation. Reese and his husband are proud fathers of three children.