



From the Inside **Uphill Battle**

It rages on.

By Stephen M. Studdert

Pretty much nobody, especially the media, pays attention to the lackluster Department of the Interior, a boring backwater by Washington norms. State, Defense, and Justice are much more seductive, more sensational. But for those of us in the rural American West, what Interior quietly does has enormous impact for each of us. So, since Trump's inauguration I've kept watch on what's happening behind the scenes at that often-overlooked department. Here's my midterm report.

Lest you mistakenly think DOI bureaucrats don't really matter, they "manage" an astounding fifth of all U.S. land and 1.5 billion acres offshore. BLM alone "manages" 248 million acres of public land, 99.4 percent of which is in western states, and administers about 700 million acres of federal subsurface minerals. Add to that the U.S. Forest Service and its 192 million acres, also predominantly in the West.

Trump's first Interior Secretary, Montana Congressman Ryan Zinke, has now resigned. Zinke courageously honored Trump's charge to install responsible commonsense thinking and best practices including fixing forest and range management, fire suppression, livestock grazing, wild horse populations, sage grouse habitat, mineral production, oil and gas extraction, and a host of other nonsensical and often abusive bureaucratic overreaches jeopardizing western states.

Zinke launched the boldest reorganization in Interior's 168-year history, proposed to streamline bureaucracy and relocate thousands of employees to the West where their work is, and proposed an eight percent reduction to DOI's 70,000 workforce—all met with burly swamp resistance.

Zinke delivered on his welcome promise to crack down on what he branded "the wide-

spread and pervasive culture of harassment and discrimination" at the agency. During his tenure DOI has disciplined 1,500 employees for harassment and other misconduct. Most applauded was the outright firing of BLM's Nevada and Utah law enforcement chief, Dan Love, for official misconduct. He has reevaluated lands previously closed to mineral extraction, modified Obama fracking regulations, overturned Obama's moratorium on new coal leases, and expanded oil and gas extraction on public lands and Indian reservations across the West, all desperately important to disadvantaged rural economies.

Making it a priority that finally "local voices count," he recommended logical reductions to Obama's highhanded 11th-hour national monument landgrabs. This included the nationally controversial Bears Ears in Utah which was decimating to the local economy, yet in doing so he preserved cultural, historical, archeological and environmental treasures.

DOI, joined by USDA, is finally acknowledging that poor forest management, especially regarding dead and dying timber, has contributed to the West's worsening wild fires. Long overdue fixes are forthcoming.

In two short years the Trump administration has made extraordinary progress in fixing misguided public policies and regulations, and we owe Trump and Zinke our gratitude for actions strongly beneficial to the American West. Much remains to be accomplished, but it will now be an even more arduous undertaking with Democrats retaking control of the House of Representatives.

Trump and Interior lose vital House leadership partners, especially an indispensable advocate in my respected friend Rep. Rob Bishop, a steadfast champion of issues you and I care about, who will no longer chair the crucial House Natural Resources Committee. The new chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, Rep. Raul Grijalva of Arizona, has already promised harassing investigations specifically of Zinke's Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monument reductions. (See page 10.)

Can Interior's lifesaving refocused policies survive politically orchestrated long knives and intensifying activist resistance? Only time will tell, but for the rural West the uphill battle rages on. ■

Stephen M. Studdert, a sixth-generation westerner, was a senior White House advisor to three presidents.

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