

Op-Ed: Interior Secretary Zinke, Protect Our National Parks

April 6, 2017

Originally posted in *The Hill*: <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/energy-environment/327625-interior-secretary-zinke-protect-our-national-parks>

Just last year, the nation observed the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, a year-long celebration that resulted in record visitation in many of our national parks. Americans and our guests from around the world were reminded of the foresight of Congress when, in 1916, a federal system of parks was created. Congress established the fundamental purpose of these parks as "...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Now, barely three months into the second century of the National Park System, the new administration has issued orders that, if implemented fully, could indelibly harm many of the same parks we so recently celebrated. On March 28, President Trump issued an executive order (EO) to rollback numerous environmental protection policies and regulations related to oil, gas, and mineral extraction on public lands. On March 29, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke issued Secretarial Order #3349 that mirrored many of the requirements of the EO. The rollbacks identified in these orders will harm park values and worsen air quality problems that are already impacting resources and the quality of visitor experiences.

We are especially concerned about a provision in the Secretarial Order directing Interior agencies to review regulations related to the management of "non-Federal oil and gas rights" on agency-managed lands. For the Park Service, this means a review of 36 CFR Part 9, Subpart B (the "9B" regulations). Though not widely known, 12 parks currently have oil and gas operations and another 30 parks have the potential for future development of privately held oil, gas, and other mineral rights within their boundaries. In these areas, the Federal government owns only the surface of the land, but manages these landscapes as part of the National Park System.

We understand and support that energy development on public lands contributes to jobs and energy independence. We also know that energy extraction operations located in or near national parks must be well planned and managed to ensure an appropriate balance between energy development and resource conservation.

The 9B regulations were first issued in 1979 to guide management of oil and gas operations in those parks where permitted; they were updated in 2016. The updates were long overdue and necessary to protect park resources from the kinds of drilling operations occurring in parks today. Key improvements included eliminating exemptions regarding access across park lands and for operations grandfathered in 1979 that have precluded NPS from managing 319 of the 534 non-federal oil and gas wells occurring in parks today.

The revision also removed the 1979 cap on performance bonds for approved operations, which had become completely inadequate to cover actual reclamation costs today. Absent an adequate bond, the Park Service, and thus the American taxpayer, can get stuck with expensive reclamation costs.

The gist of our concern with the Secretarial Order's is that the mandatory review and possible amendment or repeal of the Park Service 9B regulations suggest the real possibility that environmental safeguards designed to protect park resources could be seriously weakened or even removed. The result may be significant increases in drilling for oil and gas in 42 parks.

We were encouraged by then-Congressman Zinke's testimony at his Jan. 17 Senate confirmation hearing where he eloquently described his appreciation for the importance of protecting America's public lands, including parks. Park advocates everywhere found Mr. Zinke's words reassuring.

Now, the Secretary is confronted with the challenge of acting on these promises. The issuance of Secretarial Order 3349 is one of Secretary Zinke's first major actions and, unfortunately, raises serious concerns about his level of commitment to conserving the vast natural resources found on America's most treasured public lands. Soon, when decisions are made whether to weaken, rescind, or leave in place the Park Service's 9B regulations, we will see if his first actions as secretary are consistent with his words.

Mr. Secretary, we are counting on you to fulfill the 100-year old promise made to the American people in the National Park Service Organic Act, which is to conserve the parks and "leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Maureen Finnerty is the Chair of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, an organization of over 1,200 former and current National Park Service employees with 30,000 years of collective experience.