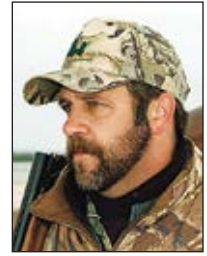


WHERE IS THE BALANCE?

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Eighteen months into the new administration, I am at a loss. Not a loss of hope but a loss of understanding. We face many conservation issues in this country. So far, I have not seen much progress in addressing these issues. Recently, the Department of Interior promised a pivot toward conservation. I want to believe that is true and await action to support that stated intent. Though it is not my desire or inclination to generate controversy, I have decided to write what many in my profession are now only willing to speak about privately. My current thoughts and perceptions are not intended to offend but are widely shared by many in my profession and thus deserve acknowledgment.

The challenges confronting the Interior Department are staggering. Managing 500 million acres—20 percent of the nation's land surface—is a formidable task. Providing stewardship of Native American lands, education, and health is monumental. Addressing the needs for energy production on public lands and waters while maintaining adequate habitat for our nation's fish and wildlife is a balancing act where ultimately there are winners and losers. Protecting the nation's most iconic landscapes, our national parks and wildlife refuges, is a tall order. All of these complex challenges and many more are the responsibility of the Department of Interior.

The department's mission is, "The Department of the Interior protects and manages the nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provides scientific and

other information about those resources; and honors its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated island communities." To date, the Interior Department has acknowledged that much of its activity has been focused on the important effort of providing energy for the nation. Streamlining regulations and rules, opening tracts of land for drilling-permit applications, and providing the energy industry with an influential voice at Interior has been largely successful. But how does that square with the mission? How have development and conservation been balanced?

An example is the 11-state landscape-scale sage-grouse management plans. These plans were years in the making. The collaboration among federal and state agencies, private landowners, industry, and conservationists was unprecedented. Shortcomings in the plans have been identified, but surgical changes were recommended rather than larger changes. In the first few months of this administration, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) opened its sage-grouse management plans for review. Examination of plans are always appropriate; however, this effort seemed premature and destined for inevitable changes. As a result, BLM recently opened large tracts of sage-grouse habitat, which were previously slated for protection, in Wyoming and other states for potential leasing.

Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have amended or are in the process of amending

environmental regulations and rules that were years in the making and which have had years of experience in administration and enforcement. The National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act originated in the 1970s. They have been amended through time. Each of the acts and the subsequent regulations have reflected prevailing attitudes with respect to the necessity of environmental protection and conservation. Are they perfect in current form? Of course not. However, it appears from the outside that attempts are being made to dramatically change these laws and regulations. For example, a recent Interior decision to interpret "incidental take" as described in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, has countered decades of interpretation and prosecutorial discretion. Many professionals are asking, "Why, and why now?"

With all the challenges facing fish and wildlife, with the public values associated with conservation, and with the contributions these resources afford our national economy, well-being, and quality of life, why the sudden change of opinion on decades of legal interpretation and conservation progress? Reduced budget requests demonstrated a declining support for science functions at EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Geological Survey. Has anyone considered whether our science capability match our science needs? Concurrently, Interior has committed to a complicated and comprehensive reorganization. The primary intent of the reorganization makes good sense: better

agency coordination and reduced administrative expenses. However, in the absence of additional information with respect to the reorganization plan and its overall expense, there is no evidence that the intent will be accomplished. This is all occurring without nominated or confirmed leadership at the Fish and Wildlife Service, Park Service or Bureau of Land Management.

Taken alone, each effort of the administration may seem appropriate with respect to energy development. However, taken together, they seem to indicate that conservation has taken a back seat to development. Secretary Ryan Zinke recently held a meeting of leading national conservation organizations where he talked of a grand pivot toward conservation. All of us in the room applauded that direction, and many have offered assistance. But we need actions, not just words. Based on the secretary's announcement, I hope I have a better understanding and comfort level of where Interior is headed. The Boone and Crockett Club, regular, professional and Associates alike would be wise to consider the concerns of fish and wildlife professionals to help Interior pivot and broaden its focus on conservation. ■