

# Interior Secretary Nominee Says He Will Balance Energy, Environment

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WASHINGTON—The former oil industry lobbyist now in charge of the Interior Department says he's prepared to balance the interests of environmentalists against an administration that has put a priority on opening public lands to energy development.

David Bernhardt has represented oil producers and pipeline companies and, as the No. 2 at Interior, helped lead an effort to reopen millions of acres of public lands to drillers and miners.

But in his first full-length interview since President Trump [nominated him](#) to formally take over as interior secretary, Mr. Bernhardt acknowledged that his department has "room to grow" on wildlife protections and environmental stewardship.

"At the end of the day, the secretary's job and the department's job is one of balance," Mr. Bernhardt told The Wall Street Journal. "You have to harmonize.

"We have a very balanced agenda and that's where we're headed."

A 49-year-old lawyer from rural Colorado, Mr. Bernhardt was the top deputy to Secretary Ryan Zinke until early January, when Mr. Zinke [resigned](#) amid [ethics investigations](#). The acting secretary since then, Mr. Bernhardt was tapped by Mr. Trump Monday to be promoted officially, pending Senate confirmation.

Many environmentalists are skeptical of Mr. Bernhardt. He is considered by both allies and opponents to be among the most knowledgeable lawyers in his field and the mastermind behind many Interior initiatives, several of which [infuriated environmentalists](#) during Mr. Zinke's tenure and when Mr. Bernhardt worked for the George W. Bush administration.

Any outreach on environmental issues now is likely just a move to ease what is likely to be a contentious Senate confirmation process, said Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which represents government employees in environmental fields. The Senate hasn't yet set a date for its hearing.

"He was driving the policy. There's no reason to trust him," Mr. Ruch said. "He's done more to undermine the mission of the department than any living individual....If he's confirmed, nothing will change."

Mr. Bernhardt's phone calls went to a handful of groups often connected with hunters and fishers, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Ducks Unlimited and the National Wildlife Federation.

Several other groups, like the Natural Resources Defense Council, have already announced opposition to his nomination.

Conservation is a core mission of the Interior Department, which oversees vast swaths of the country, but it has taken a public back seat in an administration that has promoted an “energy dominance” agenda. The department made several proposals to help oil and gas producers, including opening up nearly all the country’s offshore areas [for oil and gas drilling](#) and rolling back climate policy.

The emphasis on energy won’t change, Mr. Bernhardt said, but that doesn’t mean the department can’t also champion conservation.

“I really believe it’s a false choice to say it’s one or the other,” he added. “We have room to work together in a unified way on a lot of things.”

Mr. Bernhardt spent part of the week calling environmental groups to promise their priorities won’t be left out, either. That means more work with the states on land conservation, keeping development out of the path of migrating animals and addressing a backlog of maintenance of national parks, Mr. Bernhardt said.

Mr. Zinke made similar pledges that many environmentalists felt went unfulfilled in favor of [helping fossil fuel industries](#). That disappointed even some right-leaning conservation groups that originally supported Mr. Zinke.

Mr. Bernhardt will need to come through with a lot of funding to back up his promises, said Whit Fosburgh, chief executive of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. Overhauled protections for the [sage grouse](#), which Interior proposed in December, need more than \$200 million in federal funds over four years to protect the bird and other affected species, he said.

And Mr. Bernhardt now will be primarily responsible for putting serious enforcement provisions behind protections for migrating animals, and for support to states that may want broader wildlife protections or environmental mitigation for drilling and mining on public lands.

“Over the last two years of working with him, he has never told us something and then turned around and done something else,” Mr. Fosburgh said. “So I trust him, and if he’s saying he’s making a priority of something, then I think he’ll put forward his best effort to do it.”