

Today (4/21/25) the White House under President Donald J. Trump celebrated Earth Day by announcing that “we finally have a president who follows science,” with policies “rooted in the belief that Americans are the best stewards of our vast natural resources—no ‘Green New Scam’ required.” One of the policies the White House champions is “opening more federal lands and waters for oil, gas, and critical mineral extraction.”

Four days ago, on April 18, journalist Wes Siler noted in his Wes Siler’s Newsletter that the day before, Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum had signed an extraordinary order. The order assigned to the assistant secretary for policy, management, and budget, or AS-PMB, control over the Department of the Interior, including its personnel and its budget.

Siler explains that “[t]he person currently serving as AS-PMB (which in normal times would require Senate confirmation) is DOGE operative Tyler Hassen, the CEO of a Houston-based energy company.” Jennifer Rokala, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Western Priorities, said in a statement: “Elon Musk is now effectively in charge of America’s public lands.”

Siler notes that Burgum has handed power over the Department of the Interior to “a hitherto unknown political operative” who is holding his position in violation of the appointments clause of the Constitution.

He also notes that the Department of the Interior “manages the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, Bureau of Trust Funds Administration, Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey,” in addition to the National Park Service. “As such,” Siler writes, “Hassen is now responsible for 70,000 employees, the administration of numerous international treaties, the welfare of 574 Native American Tribes, 433 national park sites, over 500 million acres of public lands, 700 million acres of subsurface minerals, and 3.2 billion acres of the Outer Continental Shelf.”

Burgum’s order says that his order is designed “to effectuate the consolidation, unification and optimization of administrative functions within the Department of the Interior...in order to achieve effectiveness, accountability and cost savings for the American taxpayer.” In other words, he is falling back on the idea of further cuts to the U.S. government in order to save money.

In fact, the public lands already make billions of dollars a year for the United States through tourism, but since the 1970s, the right wing has come to see the public ownership of lands as an affront to the idea that individuals should be able to use the resources they believe God has put there for them to use. Developers have encouraged that ideology, for privatization of America’s western lands has always meant that they ended up in the hands of a few wealthy individuals.

That impulse shows in Project 2025. As Melinda Taylor, senior lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin Law School, told Bloomberg Law in November: “Project 2025 is a ‘wish list’ for

the oil and gas and mining industries and private developers. It promotes opening up more of our federal land to energy development, rolling back protections on federal lands, and selling off more land to private developers."

Burgum appears to be on board with that plan. On January 16, in his confirmation hearings, Burgum made it clear that he sees selling the public lands as a source of revenue, referring to them as "America's balance sheet." "[W]e've got \$36 trillion in debt," he said, but "[w]e never talk about the assets, and the assets are the land and minerals." The Interior Department, he said, "has got close to 500 million acres of surface. It's 700 million acres of subsurface and over 2 billion acres of offshore.... That's the balance sheet of America.... I believe we ought to have a deep inventory of all the assets in America. We ought to understand...what is our assets, 100 trillion, 200 trillion? We could be in great shape as a country."

*Excerpted from 'Letters From An American' by Heather Cox Richardson (Substack)*

AND WHEN THEY ARE GONE, THEY ARE GONE FOR GOOD. WHAT THEN?