

LANDLINE

How the Interior secretary has let down public lands and the nation

Doug Burgum was once seen as a conservationist. Reality shows otherwise.

On Sept. 14, the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued an internal [memo](#) directing the agency to narrow the scope of the Endangered Species Act by legalizing the accidental killing of protected wildlife.** This would eviscerate one of the nation's landmark wildlife protection laws, allowing industry to [legally slaughter endangered species](#) as long as the killing was not "intentionally directed against a particular animal or animals."

In other words, it would still be against the law for someone to hunt and kill a peregrine falcon, but a timber company could legally wipe out an entire family of falcons while harvesting trees, while an energy company could get away with exterminating an entire species of fish with an oil spill.

This latest atrocity has Interior Secretary Doug Burgum's fingerprints all over it. From slashing 3 million acres from Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments and opening huge swaths of Arctic wildlands to oil and gas drilling, to streamlining uranium mining and fossil fuel projects and approving data centers on public lands without any public input — the list goes on and on. **With less than two years under his belt, the former North Dakota governor has become one of the most environmentally unfriendly Interior secretaries in the nation's history — rivaling even James Watt, Gale Norton and Albert B. Fall.**



Yet at the outset of Trump's second term, some in the environmental community saw Burgum as the Cabinet's lone bright spot, a conservationist in the mold of fellow North Dakotan Teddy Roosevelt, whom Burgum claims to admire. In January 2025, the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, **a coalition of outdoor-oriented businesses and organizations, endorsed Trump's pick, writing that "Burgum's history of support for outdoor recreation, the outdoor recreation economy, and the protection of public lands and waters makes his leadership critical."**

Burgum's record as governor — he had pledged to make oil-rich North Dakota carbon-neutral by 2030 via renewable energy development and carbon capture — and his portrayal of himself as a pragmatic, old-school Western Republican distinguished him from other potential Trump nominees.

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable is not a hardcore environmental group by any stretch of the imagination, but it does advocate for conservation and public-lands access, and the outdoor gear company REI was among the companies and groups that signed the letter. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Senate confirmed Burgum in an 80 to 17 vote, with support from conservationist Democrats from New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Arizona.

These senators should have examined Burgum's political past more closely. As part of his carbon-neutral push, he supported a controversial proposal — a carbon dioxide pipeline — backed by Continental Resources, the massive oil and gas company founded by his friend Harold Hamm. And he supported draconian measures to squelch protests

against the Dakota Access Pipeline, issuing evacuation orders and signing legislation that criminalized protesting. Energy Transfer, the company behind the pipeline, subsequently donated tens of thousands of dollars to Burgum's 2020 re-election campaign.

Nor was he shy about his desire to run Interior like a business. During his confirmation hearing, he talked about the trillions of dollars of "assets" buried under the nation's public lands. "That's the balance sheet of America," he said, "and if we were a company, they would look at us and say, 'Wow, you are really restricting your balance sheet.'" While that surely set off alarms for environmentally minded lawmakers, he added that his so-called public land balance sheets did not include wilderness areas or national parks or "those areas we have to absolutely protect for their precious stuff."

At the time, I wasn't exactly bullish on Burgum, but even so, I was shocked by what followed. Immediately after taking office, Burgum became the most enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump's "energy dominance" agenda. Under his direction, the amount of Bureau of Land Management acreage leased to oil and gas companies skyrocketed; the agency handed out drilling permits at a rate not seen since George W. Bush, cut the entire environmental review and permitting process for a Utah uranium mine down to two weeks and oversaw dozens of other regulatory rollbacks, including, among other things, redefining "take" under the Migratory Bird Act.

It was certainly ugly, and it prompted REI CEO Mary Beth Laughton to retract the company's endorsement. Initially, however, Burgum did keep his promise to protect national monuments, parks and the other areas he considered "precious."

As time went on, though, it became increasingly clear that the only thing "precious" to Burgum was the support of his corporate cronies, the admiration of the MAGA base and, of course, the approval of President Donald Trump. In an astonishingly short time, Burgum has pulverized environmental safeguards, leaving America's public lands vulnerable for corporations to plunder at will.

Even taken on his own "pro-business" terms, Burgum's tenure has been a failure. He has hurt the nation's "balance sheet" by blocking solar and onshore wind projects, paying offshore wind companies to abandon federal leases and killing the Public Lands Rule. By reducing royalty rates on oil and gas leases, he cut into the revenue the government and taxpayers received from those lands. Burgum eviscerated methane emissions limits on oil and gas facilities, allowing drillers to spew the potent greenhouse gas and other pollutants into the air, basically throwing away millions of dollars' worth of "assets" (i.e., natural gas). And he is pushing to expand public-lands grazing, which is a huge money sink; you're not going to make a profit by charging less than \$2 a month for a cow to eat a ton of the public's forage.

Meanwhile, Burgum has become the point man for Trump's ostentatious vanity projects, eagerly [funneling tens of millions of dollars](#) from the country's "precious" national parks into Trump dictator kitsch, including the ballroom and triumphal arch, not to mention the whole reflecting pool fiasco, which also played out on his watch.

And, of course, Burgum ultimately reneged on his promise to keep his greedy hands off "precious places." He has moved to eliminate the Biden-era ban on new oil and gas

leases around Chaco Culture National Historical Park, and, in addition to shrinking Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, he eliminated the Intertribal Bears Ears Commission — a blow to tribal sovereignty. The new boundaries went into effect on Sept. 11; within a week, at least 13 new mining claims had been filed in Bears Ears alone.

Less than two years into his tenure, it's clear that Burgum is worse than an ideologue: He's a naked opportunist happy to shred his integrity and credibility and sacrifice the nation's public lands to benefit his fellow oligarchs, while constantly kowtowing to Trump so he doesn't lose his cushy job. As a result, Burgum has not only failed in his role as a steward of the environment and wildlife but has shown himself to be a lousy businessman. History will decide whether he will prove the worst Interior secretary of all time. But it's already clear that he is by far the most disappointing one.