

Drilling on Federal Lands: Department of Interior Issues Order to Curb Delays

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Yesterday, the Secretary of the Interior, **Ryan Zinke**, signed an order that seeks to tamp down on delays in the permitting of federal land for oil-and-gas exploration and production activities. The Interior Department's press release is [available here](#), and the order itself can be accessed at [this link](#).

As of January 31st of this year, there was a backlog of over 2,800 applications for drilling permits on federal leases. In a telephonic press conference, Secretary Zinke did not mince words when he noted that "there's a reason why our energy revolution from 2008 forward has been primarily on private lands and state lands, and not federal lands—we have been particularly, I think, punitive in some ways."

Some highlights from the DOI's order include:

- Reviews of applications for drilling permits now must be completed within 30 days. Last year, by contrast, the average processing time was a staggering 257 days.
- The Bureau of Land Management will, going forward, be required to conduct quarterly lease sales.
- The preparation of a status report by Department staff, due to the Secretary's office within 45 days, that will include an action plan "for improv[ing] the Federal onshore oil and gas leasing program."

The decision to cut through delays and other red tape was of course greeted with enthusiasm from the industry. Echoing those sentiments was Congressman Rob Bishop, the Chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, who emphasized that the Republican-controlled House would support Secretary Zinke's initiatives with new laws, if that's what it takes:

Secretary Zinke's commitment to foster regulatory certainty and unleash our energy potential is a welcome shift in priorities at Interior. We will be working in close coordination with the Secretary to provide the Department with the statutory tools to ensure that responsible energy development on federal lands is no longer held hostage to intransigent bureaucracy and ludicrous permitting delays.

Unsurprisingly, the DOI's aggressive measures were met with venom from environmental activist groups. Nada Culver, for example, the senior policy director at the Wilderness Society, has been quoted as saying that "[t]he oil and gas industry has been sitting on thousands of approved permits on their millions of acres of leased land for years now. The real problem here is this administration's obsession with selling out more of our public lands to the oil and gas industry at the expense of the American people."

Before we all get too excited, however, don't look for all of these (long overdue) changes to arrive immediately. As Secretary Zinke himself cautioned on the heels of the DOI's press release announcing the new order: "This is not going to

be done overnight."

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