

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Alan Lowenthal
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources Legislative Hearing on the

Accessing Strategic Resources Offshore (ASTRO) Act

October 11, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

There are a number of things that are deeply concerning in this discussion draft. The most concerning, I believe, is the provision that allows the Secretary of the Interior to schedule offshore lease sales wherever and whenever he wants.

The point of a five-year-planning process would be gone. Instead of carefully gathering and balancing stakeholder input and providing certainty to coastal areas for five years at a time, every coastal area would perpetually be at risk.

Lease sales would be entirely at the discretion of the Secretary, who would be free to ignore the five-year-plan altogether.

This would never be acceptable to the people of California, and many other states, but even more so now when we would be relying on the discretion of this particular Secretary.

Over the past several weeks, there have been a number of disturbing revelations coming out of the Department of the Interior.

There are new ethical questions every day about Secretary Zinke's travel, including revelations reported last night by Politico about political activity at ski resorts and steakhouses.

Then there are his statements on energy that are downright wrong or make no sense. This morning, the Washington Post fact checker gave Secretary Zinke four

Pinnochios for claiming the U.S. has struggled to produce low-cost, abundant, and reliable energy.

They have yet to look at his repeated claim that additional oil and gas revenues would help the National Park Service, but that one has even less basis in fact.

And in addition to these ethical and factual issues, I believe that Secretary Zinke is demonstrating the wrong set of principles to lead the Department of the Interior, which he has repeatedly stated is being restyled to become the Department of Drilling and Mining, with an “energy dominance” agenda that he proudly claims is permeating every agency and bureau in the Department.

Presumably some of the dedicated career employees in the Department have pointed out that the mission of Interior is not simply to extract energy, but to protect landscapes, preserve wildlife habitat, and manage the public land and special natural places that belong to all Americans.

That includes sportsmen and conservationists, not simply oil and gas executives.

Perhaps it was some dedicated employees pointing that out to the Secretary that caused him to claim two weeks ago that thirty percent of people at the Department were, quote, not loyal to the flag.

I don't know what Secretary Zinke thinks is the role of civil servants at Interior, but they are there to be loyal to the Constitution, our laws, and the American people. They are not there to blindly follow the Secretary wherever he wants to take the Department of the Interior.

There are disturbing indications that the Secretary intends to purge those who he sees as disloyal to him. He has moved 50 senior executives around into positions that many of them are not qualified for, including the chief climate change scientist who was told to be an oil and gas auditor, at least until he resigned in frustration last week.

There is repeated talk of a massive reorganization of the department, and we have heard there is interest in having the Department be run more like a business.

That's not how our government works. That's not how we should want it to work. The last time Interior tried to act like a business led directly to the 2008 Royalty In Kind scandal, where some regulators at the Minerals Management Service were partying, doing drugs, and sleeping with people in the very industry they were supposed to be regulating.

It's this structure that the Secretary has said he might want to go back to.

This is extremely concerning for those of us who live in coastal areas.

Under this legislation, we would be dependent on a single-minded Secretary with a questionable handle on the facts to determine whether there should be more offshore drilling off our coasts.

And then to protect our beaches, our fisheries, and our entire coastal economies, we would be dependent on a regulatory system that he wants to take backwards.

This draft legislation would put our coasts at much higher risk, and I believe the Secretary is already doing enough of that on his own.

I thank the witnesses again for being here, and I yield back.