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Mismanaging Public Lands

By Thomas A. Barron

Long after James Watt was forced to resign as Interior Secretary, largely because of political indiscretions, his most cherished policies continue to be quietly implemented by the Administration. What we now have in Secretary Donald P. Hodel is a James Watt with good public-relations skills. The result is that the long-term economic and environmental costs of gross mismanagement of public lands are escalating. This mismanagement — a crisis, really — may devastate our nation's future.

These lands cover more than 25 percent of the country — almost a million square miles. They afford us the opportunity to manage our energy, natural resource and recreational needs into the distant future. They also represent a heritage of majestic scenery, history, scientific data and inspiration.

Instead of managing these assets rationally in order to benefit our children and grandchildren, the Administration continues to push for rapid liquidation of them.

An example of this policy now facing Senate action is the Arctic Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. The Fish and Wildlife Service has described this fragile ecosystem as "the last unspoiled area of its kind in the entire Northern Hemisphere." Of the 1,125 miles of Alaskan Arctic coastline, only the 125 miles within the refuge have not been opened for oil and gas drilling. Yet Mr. Hodel has urged Congress to drop the restrictions on this last remaining coastline, allowing it to be degraded into a network of derricks, drill pads, roads, pipelines and airstrips. The Interior Department itself has predicted only a 19 percent chance of finding oil here.

Small wonder that a bipartisan group of seven senators has introduced legislation to protect this area

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as a wilderness. Several other senators have urged the completion of critical energy and environmental studies before any decision on development is made. We should at least examine the alternatives before we permanently disrupt this landscape.

Here is another example of mismanagement: Despite nearly a decade of depressed timber prices, the Administration has pushed to increase logging in our national forests by 72 percent and to construct more than 200,000 miles of new logging roads by the year 2030. Not only does this program needlessly violate sensitive ecosystems, in most forests it currently loses money.

A General Accounting Office study, based on Forest Service figures, revealed that the Service lost \$1.2 billion on its timber sales program from 1982 through 1986. The plan to in-

Reagan's 'fire sale' treatment.

crease harvest levels, mainly in economically unsuitable forests, would compound these losses. In the central Rockies, where the Government loses 75 cents on every dollar it spends to market timber, the Administration wants to boost the harvest level 118 percent.

The most pernicious example of mismanagement is the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. The Forest Service continues to spend \$50 million yearly to subsidize the logging of 450 million board feet while receiving less than \$1 million in fees. The stated justification of this boondoggle is promotion of employment in southeastern Alaska. Yet, jobs there have declined by 40 percent in the last six years. Meanwhile, the Forest Service is destroying the only largely intact rain forest left in the world's temperate zones.

The outer continental shelf is also threatened by short-term thinking. The oil and gas leasing program announced by Mr. Hodel last July proposes leasing the Alaskan Bristol Bay, the Georges Bank off New England, areas adjacent to the Florida Keys and California's northern coast — areas of high environmental importance and low oil potential.

The Interior Department's own estimates show that these leases would generate a total of no more than 41 days of oil at current levels of consumption. Moreover, Mr. Hodel's program rejected the joint recommendation of the oil industry and conservationists to exclude 33.5 million acres of the Bering Sea. Five coastal states have filed suit to set aside the program. In his rush to lease these lands, Mr. Hodel apparently also did not question the wisdom of dumping huge new quantities of Federal assets on the marketplace during a time of depressed prices. This is no way to maximize long-term value.

Our national parks and wildlife refuges have fared no better. Last year alone, more than 284 million visitors surged through the national park system's 337 units, a tenfold increase since 1950. Despite this show of public affection, the Administration remains oblivious to the mounting threats to these irreplaceable lands.

It has encouraged mining at the edge of Grand Canyon National Park, geothermal development adjacent to Yellowstone National Park, oil and gas drilling just outside Glacier National Park and logging on the borders of Olympic National Park. Development of these areas offers little if any economic return to the taxpayers, and prevents future generations from protecting these lands, many of which are wildlife habitats critical to park ecosystems.

The Administration has managed our assets as if it were conducting a fire sale, without regard for prevailing prices and market conditions, and for environmental consequences. This election year is the right time for the public to demand intelligent stewardship of these lands — for ourselves and for our children. □