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Zinke to step down as Interior Secretary

Secretary protected
county, pushed for
development of public
lands nationwide

By **Johnathan Hettinger**,
Enterprise Staff Writer

Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, who helped protect Park County's environmental resources while rolling back environmental protections nationwide, is set to resign at the end of the year.

Zinke, who was serving his first term as Congressman from Montana

when President Donald Trump tapped him to lead the Department of the Interior in 2017, is resigning amid federal investigations into his travel, political activity and potential conflicts of interest.

During his two-year tenure at Interior, Zinke implemented a 20-year administrative withdrawal of mining leases in 30,000 acres of Custer Gallatin National Forest on Emigrant Peak and at the northern border of Yellowstone National Park. He also halted a proposed sale of Bureau of Land Management oil and gas leases near Livingston.

At the same time, under Zinke's watch, the Interior Department moved to auction off more oil leases, ended a moratorium on new sales of federally owned coal, and repealed

mandates governing drilling.

"I feel like our relationship with Zinke is complicated because on a national level, I think a lot of people are glad to see him go, but on a Park County level, he did good things for the community," said Melissa Nootz, a field organizer for Mom's Clean Air Force, a nonpartisan children's health organization, and member of the Livingston City Commission.

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Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke announces an administrative withdrawal of mining rights in Custer-Gallatin National Forest in front of a group of community members at Sage Lodge on Oct. 8.

Enterprise photo by Nate Howard



"I do think he listened to our local community," Nootz said. "He did that here, but he didn't do that in other areas of the West, especially in regards to public lands."

In October, Zinke visited Sage Lodge to announce the administrative withdrawal, an extension of a two-year withdrawal put in place in November 2016 by then-Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell.

"If I could make it permanent, I would," he said at the time.

Zinke came out in opposition to the mines as a Congressman, saying that Paradise Valley is an inappropriate place for a gold mine. Zinke also said that Park County was an inappropriate place for oil and gas drilling.

"Multiple use is about balance," Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke said when a sale of oil and gas leasing rights was postponed in March. "I've always said there are places where it is appropriate to develop and where it's not. This area certainly deserves more study, and appropriately we have decided to defer (these parcels)."

Michelle Uberuaga, executive director of Park County Environmental Council, said she was grateful Zinke supported the administrative withdrawal and his responsiveness to the community on the mining and oil and gas leases.

"But when I talked to other people in other communities, they felt the opposite," she said.

Uberuaga said it seemed like he was inconsistent with who was he listening to.

"Zinke really did help this

community," she said.

Bryan Wells, a founding member of the Yellowstone Gateway Business Coalition, said that Zinke was responsive as both as a congressman and Secretary of the Interior, listening to the community's desires. Wells went to Washington, D.C., in May 2016 to lobby against the gold mines. Wells also met with Zinke in Livingston in September, and Zinke told Wells he talked to many people and couldn't find many who supported the mine, so he decided to oppose it.

Zinke also called Wells later that year, on his way to the Yellowstone National Park Centennial Celebration, as he was driving through Paradise Valley, thinking about the mining issue.

"I thought he tried to be really fair," Wells said. "He talked to a lot of people, and he tried to base his decisions on that."

Dale Sexton, owner of Timber Trails and a member of the Yellowstone Gateway Business Coalition who introduced Zinke at the Sage Lodge event, said he appreciated that Zinke listened to Park County but felt like "a pawn" when Zinke rolled back environmental protections nationwide.

That included the reduction of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, from 1.4 million acres to 200,000 acres. This year, Sexton and his family went to Bears Ears for spring break to experience the area while it still existed.

"A lot of the things he did were upsetting to me," Sexton said. "After his appointment, basically we felt, here's this appointee from

Montana, who's not necessarily as moderate but not by any means an extremist, but then I felt a little bit like a pawn when he actually went to work for the administration."

Sexton said he didn't know how much of a role Zinke played in oil and gas leasing near Livingston.

"That felt a lot more local to me, I'm not sure how much Zinke had his hands in that," Sexton said.

But he did say he feels "beholden" to Zinke for the administrative withdrawal.

"The mining issue worked in our favor, but he's been on board with that long before being Secretary of the Interior," Sexton said. "It was really encouraging, but at the same time, he was working for that administration and that administration has not been very friendly as far as environmental issues go, with the exception of the mine."

Overall, Sexton said he wishes Zinke was still Secretary of the Interior.

"I'm a little leery of who's next because I think Zinke was a bit of a pawn, but I like to think he was still somewhat beholden to Montana,"

he said. "And I'm worried about who's out there and who's gonna be next."

As interior secretary, Zinke pushed to develop oil, natural gas and coal beneath public lands in line with the administration's business-friendly aims. But he has been dogged by ethics probes, including one centered on a Montana land deal involving a foundation he created and the chairman of an energy services company, Halliburton, that does business with the Interior Department.

Investigators also are reviewing Zinke's decision to block two tribes from opening a casino in Connecticut and his redrawing of boundaries to shrink a Utah national monument. Zinke has denied wrongdoing.

The Associated Press reported last month that the department's internal watchdog had referred an investigation of Zinke to the Justice Department.

Zinke's travels with his wife, Lola Zinke, also had come under scrutiny.

Interior's inspector general's office said Zinke allowed his wife to ride in government vehicles with him despite a department policy

that prohibits nongovernment officials from doing so. The report also said the department spent more than \$25,000 to provide security for the couple when they took a vacation to Turkey and Greece.

Trump, in tweeting Zinke's departure, said the former Montana congressman "accomplished much during his tenure" and that a replacement would be announced next week. The Cabinet post requires Senate confirmation.

Zinke tweeted Saturday: "I love working for the President and am incredibly proud of all the good work we've accomplished together. However, after 30 years of public service, I cannot justify spending thousands of dollars defending myself and my family against false allegations."

Montana's Republican Sen. Steve Daines tweeted: "Thank you @SecretaryZinke for restoring commonsense management of our public lands, fighting to end the war on coal and for making the U.S. energy dominant. Montana is proud of you!"

Zinke's focus on the president's energy agenda was

cheered by oil, gas and mining advocates, who credit the administration with seeking to balance conservation with development on public lands. But his tenure was denounced by most conservation groups.

"Zinke will go down as the worst Interior secretary in history," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement released Saturday. "His slash-and-burn approach was absolutely destructive for public lands and wildlife."

As head of Interior, Zinke made plans to realign the agency's bureaucracy, trimming the equivalent of 4,600 jobs, about 7 percent of its workforce. He also proposed a massive overhaul that would have moved decision-making out of Washington, relocating headquarters staff to Western states at a cost of \$17.5 million.

An early Trump supporter, Zinke is close to the president's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., and publicly expressed his interest in a Cabinet post when Trump visited Montana in May 2016.

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Reed Evje, a student in the Montessori Island Kindergarten Class raises his hand to answer a question presented by Food Resource Center program manager Kelsey Tanner, far left, Wednesday at the food center. Teacher Ruby Ensing, far right, brought her students to the food center to donate their collection of food.

Enterprise photos by Kate Howard

HEALTHY FOOD, HEALTHY KIDS

By Johnathan Hettinger
Enterprise Staff Writer

The concept is so simple that even kindergartners can understand it: You need a healthy environment — clean air, clean water, good soil — to grow healthy food.

That was the lesson the Montessori Island kindergarten class received on Wednesday while dropping off 148 pounds of food to the Food Resource Center. The class got a tour of the center, seeing the different types of foods and learning that other children sometimes need help.

The Food Resource Center was overflowing with generosity on Wednesday afternoon. In addition to the kindergartners, East Side School also donated 668 pounds of food and the Livingston Fire and Rescue department donated coats, hats and gloves for children.

The class of about 10 children learned about food insecurity from Kelsey Tanner, program coordinator at the Food Resource Center, and Michelle Uberuaga, executive director of Park County Environmental Council and field organizer for Moms Clean Air Force.

Uberuaga spoke to the class about how food grows and how a changing climate is affecting where and how food is grown.

"Everybody needs healthy air and clean water. People need that. Animals need that. That's the basic gist of it. When you're



Hannah Boyce takes a peek at some cookies the students were offered following a class lesson at the Food Resource Center Wednesday.

talking to kids, you focus on the fundamentals. Our bodies need air and water to thrive, and kids get that," Uberuaga said.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, climate change risks to food security are more likely to impact poor people. Overall, farmers are tasked

with feeding a likely worldwide population of 10 billion people by 2050, despite projected declining crop yields.

While the class may not understand the details of climate change, the kids gave examples of when they had helped someone and when they needed help.

The kids all listed one thing they brought, almost exclusively listing macaroni and cheese or peanut butter.

The food drive was organized by Moms Clean Air Force, the Park County Environmental Council and the Montessori Island School.