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Lizards, not oil and gas, at risk of extinction

By Jay Lininger

Only 2 percent of the Permian Basin oil and gas lands in southeast New Mexico and west Texas are habitat for the rare dunes sagebrush lizard. Yet oil-friendly Chicken Littles continue to squawk that the sky will fall if the lizard is protected as an endangered species.

State Rep. Dennis Kintigh (R-Roswell) has claimed wildly that: “The negative impact the listing will have on jobs is frightening. The effect on New Mexico’s economy and the ability of the state to fund education and health care for the poor would be devastating.”

But the lizard’s shinnery oak sand dune habitat makes up a tiny sliver of New Mexico - less than a half-million acres.

And there’s no shortage of drilling opportunities elsewhere. Oil and gas firms own roughly 7,000

drilling permits that have been issued by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management but not yet developed. That figure has remained steady for more than a year. While industry has leased roughly 38 million acres of public land, it is actively producing or exploring on just 16 million of those acres, according to the BLM.

Moreover, oil and gas leases offered by the BLM on public land in New Mexico vastly outnumber those purchased by industry. Indeed, the only barrier to drilling is the industry itself.

Mr. Kintigh has inflated the minuscule lizard into a Godzilla-like menace, stoking fear that endangered species protection will wreck the economy as part of an ideological agenda to roll back protections for air, water, lands and wildlife.

Kintigh accepted \$35,000 from the oil and gas industry

in the 2010 election cycle - almost 20 percent more than he received from all other donors of campaign cash combined, according to Project Vote Smart. In short, the industry is his main backer.

At the behest of U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, who categorically opposes federal wildlife protections, Kintigh audaciously convened a farce “science review” of the proposal to protect dunes sagebrush lizard as endangered. Kintigh stacked his panel with people lacking expertise on the lizard who voiced opposition to its protection before they showed up, including a cowboy museum curator, a rancher and two petroleum geologists - in addition to Kintigh himself, a retired FBI agent. Conveniently, they concluded the animal should not be protected.

In contrast, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service obtained independent peer review of its proposal by scientists - including the world's foremost experts on dunes sagebrush lizards - who supported protections. The science-based proposal will help to safeguard the animal's future, and it will help to protect the environment upon which we all depend.

The New Mexico Game and Fish Department forbids deliberate harm to dunes sagebrush lizards under threat of fines or imprisonment. But even that law does not protect habitat, which continues to be lost as society escalates its demand for fossil fuel.

Since 2009, the BLM has leased nearly 30,000 acres of lizard habitat for drilling. New roads, drilling pads and other infrastructure fragment habitat and inch the animal toward extinction.

Voluntary agreements to conserve lizard habitat have no teeth and therefore leave key habitat highly vulnerable. Industry's refusal to concede an inch to prevent extinction - even on a mere 2 percent of the Permian Basin - makes a strong case for federal protection.

Turning a blind eye to the permanent loss of an animal, for the sake of short-term profit, is a betrayal of future generations - and telling the public that helping that vanishing animal will bring economic calamity is dishonest and cynical. Mr. Kintigh should serve the American people and their future, not the special interest that bankrolls him.