

## INTERIOR

Met by protests, pro-hunting council holds first session

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The Interior Department's new trophy hunting council held its first meeting. Pamela King/E&E News

The hunting advocates who dominate a controversial new Interior Department advisory council partially holstered their own convictions today in favor of a little listening.

After being greeted by protesters this morning outside Interior's headquarters, the 16 members of the International Wildlife Conservation Council settled in for an inaugural session kicked off by some Fish and Wildlife Service PowerPoint lectures and a handful of public comments.

It marked a calm and somewhat educational beginning for a council that's drawn a lot of fire, and that seemed to suit the members fine.

"I'm just trying to learn the ropes," prominent bowhunter Cameron Hanes said after the council's morning session. "I'm trying to see how the process works. This is all new."

Former Oklahoma Rep. Bill Brewster (D) echoed the sentiment, although as a three-term member of the House and the current chairman of the Capitol Hill Consulting Group, he's already hip to Washington's ways.

"I'm here to learn, more than anything else today," Brewster said during lunch. "It's a learning process for me, and I think it's too early to define what might come out of it, in any direction. We're just getting to know each other."

Brewster was subsequently selected as the council's chairman, provoking Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity to declare that "he's spent decades trophy-hunting animals and promoting the gun industry."

"He's the last person who should be advising our federal government on how to protect elephants and other imperiled species," Greenwald added in a statement.

The 12 men and four women on the council started today with a private ethics briefing, prior to their convening in the South Penthouse, located above Interior's seventh floor. Lunch wasn't anything fancy, as members scattered to the cafeteria in Interior's basement.

Established last year by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, the council was explicitly designed through its membership criteria to have a pro-hunting perspective. Its members include Safari Club International President Paul Babaz, as well as others with Safari Club affiliations (Greenwire, March 2).

“I personally have invested very heavily in Africa, and care more about it than the general person, to save wildlife in Africa, to save habitat ... and benefit the people,” John Jackson III, an attorney and past president of Safari Club International, said after the morning session.

The council will meet twice a year and provide “advice and recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior regarding the benefits that result from U.S. citizens traveling to foreign nations to engage in hunting,” according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The new panel will examine issues from “recommending removal of barriers to the importation” of legally hunted wildlife to reviewing the Endangered Species Act’s foreign listed species and streamlining import permits, according to Interior (Greenwire, Nov. 8, 2017).

“We believe that hunters and the dollars they bring to foreign nations contribute to conservation efforts,” said Greg Sheehan, principal deputy director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Council member Ivan Carter agreed, contending that legal hunting provides African countries an incentive to maintain populations and habitats. Rampant poaching has been wiping out some populations, with officials estimating that more than 1,000 rhinos and 30,000 elephants are being killed illegally every year.

“I’ve lived in Africa all my life, and I see the collapse of so many conservation areas,” Carter said at lunch, “and what I hope is to make sure the laws and regulations promote the ethical use of hunting for the benefit of wildlife.”

The new council nonetheless provoked an immediate outcry from animal welfare advocates, with more than three dozen members of Congress joining in a letter to Zinke denouncing efforts to “rationalize the behavior and advance the agenda of a miniscule subset of the uber-rich who find entertainment in killing rare wildlife.”

Animal Defenders International, in March 9 written comments, added that officials “have failed to produce credible, peer-reviewed, scientific evidentiary support for its pronouncement of trophy hunting as some ‘benefit’ or ‘enhancement’ to conservation.”

The council members, both those with and without prior inside-the-Beltway experience, now have more homework to do before their next meeting.

“I don’t know this end of it,” Hanes said. “I know hunting.”