

# Revealed: emails raise ethical questions over Trump official's role in gas project

Documents obtained by the Guardian suggest interior secretary is promoting effort tied to his former firm

**Will Parrish, The Guardian** Wed 21 Aug 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/20/david-bernhardt-interior-secretary-ethics-jordan-cove>

The US interior secretary, David Bernhardt, is promoting a fossil fuel project for which his former employer, a lobbying firm, is a paid advocate, e-mails obtained by the Guardian suggest.

Experts say Bernhardt is probably violating ethics guidelines issued by the Trump administration with the stated goal of “draining the swamp”. Based on these rules, Bernhardt [should be recused from specific issues involving a former client](#) for at least two years.

The Jordan Cove Energy Project was proposed by the Canadian energy giant Pembina to transport fracked natural gas through Oregon to the international port at Coos Bay in the state. It would include a new 232-mile pipeline that [passes through](#) about 70 miles of interior department land.

Several county commissioners from Colorado, where much of the gas is fracked, met with Bernhardt in Washington DC to boost the project in March. They included Mike Samson, Bernhardt’s [former high school teacher](#).

“Awesome time in DC he is totally behind the project and has people working on it towards completion,” Samson wrote concerning Bernhardt in a 7 March email to Ray Bucheger, a Jordan Cove lobbyist with the firm FBB Federal Relations. “He recognizes that time is of the essence and that meaningful progress needs to [be] made this year.

A screenshot from the email.

A separate text message also shows that Bucheger had hosted the county commissioners at a dinner the night before the meeting and had asked Samson to report to him what Bernhardt said about Jordan Cove.

Bernhardt represented oil companies and agribusiness interests at the Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck lobbying firm before joining the [Trump](#) administration in August 2017. Brownstein Hyatt has [worked to promote the Jordan Cove project](#) since December 2018, federal records show.

Delaney Marsco, legal council at the non-partisan [Campaign Legal Center](#), says that if Samson’s e-mailed description of the meeting is accurate, Bernhardt probably violated the ethics commitment.

“The ethics pledge barred Bernhardt from participating in a particular matter where his former employer represents a party to the matter,” Marsco said. “Bernhardt therefore should not have participated in activities surrounding approvals or permits for this project, and he should have taken care to not even appear as though he was personally involved.”

In an emailed statement to the Guardian, an interior department spokesperson, Nick Goodwin, wrote: “Secretary Bernhardt is and always has been committed to upholding his ethical responsibilities. He takes his ethics pledge very seriously. He seeks advice from career ethics officials before taking any meeting involving external parties and strictly follows their advice and guidance. The meeting with officials from Garfield and Moffat Counties was [approved](#) by the Departmental Ethics Office.”

Samson, the Garfield county commissioner, did not immediately return requests for comment.

Bernhardt is already [under fire](#) for possible ethics violations during his prior stint as assistant interior secretary under Ryan Zinke. The interior department’s inspector general is conducting [an ethics investigation](#) of him, which focuses on his role in [weakening protections for California’s delta smelt](#) – a policy change that would directly benefit one of his former clients, Westlands Water District.

During his interior department tenure, Bernhardt has been an architect of some of the agency’s most controversial and consequential decisions, including [stripping wildlife protections](#) and leasing large swaths of public lands to oil and gas companies.

Jordan Cove is a major priority of western oil and gas interests, since it would probably lead to expanded drilling in three major gas fields: the Jonah Field in Wyoming, the Piceance Basin in Colorado, and the Uintah Basin in northern Utah. It has faced strident opposition from indigenous people, environmentalists, and landowners concerned about climate change, impacts on waterways, and the use of eminent [domain](#) to seize land.

An entry in a federal official’s calendar shows that Brownstein Hyatt has specifically lobbied the interior department in regard to the Jordan Cove project. In a telltale sign that industry pressure on the Bureau of Land Management may be working, a [BLM web page](#) touts the [benefits](#) of the pipeline, even though the agency has not officially ruled on it.

Spokespeople for the US House natural resources committee, which helps oversee the interior department, did not respond to requests for comment.