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The Trump administration is opening millions of new acres to drilling — and that's just the start

By [Darryl Fears](#) and [Juliet Eilperin](#)

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The Trump administration is aggressively pressing ahead in expanding federal oil and gas industry leases that could lead to more drilling on land and at sea, defying an assessment by government scientists that the production and use of fossil fuels is accelerating climate change.

On Friday, the administration announced a final decision to lift protections for a uniquely American bird, called the greater sage grouse, on nearly 9 million acres to provide more leasing opportunities to oil, gas and mining industries.

A day earlier, an Interior Department assistant secretary confirmed that he told leaders of the fossil fuel industry last month that the Atlantic coast will almost certainly be included in the administration's plan to expand federal leasing to nearly the entire outer continental shelf. Offshore leases haven't been granted in the Atlantic for decades, and drilling hasn't been allowed for a half-century.

Joe Balash, assistant secretary for land and minerals management, said the department's determined effort to approve seismic surveys is a sign that the Eastern Seaboard is in serious play — despite concerns that blasting piercing sounds every 10 seconds for weeks on end pose risks to whales and dolphins, according to conservationists and some scientists.

"I will tell you, we wouldn't work really, really hard to get seismic permits out if that area wasn't going to be available," Balash said during a question-and-answer session following his speech at the International Association of Geophysical Contractors conference in Houston.

In his remarks, Balash said he found it "absolutely thrilling" that President Trump's "knack for keeping the attention of the media and the public focused somewhere else" has allowed Bureau of Ocean Energy Management employees to process the permits without much scrutiny. In an email to The Washington Post on Thursday, Balash said his comments reflected his appreciation that the president's leadership style made it easier to execute his energy dominance agenda.

In pursuit of that agenda over the past two years, the administration has sought to reverse dozens of regulations aimed at making oil platforms safer, reducing carbon dioxide and methane released into the atmosphere, and protecting the habitats of endangered animals and those on the verge of an endangered status.

Administration officials have argued that animals can adapt more easily to changes in habitat than conservationists believe. Critics counter that these intrusions pose an added threat to the greater sage grouse, which is imperiled, and North Atlantic right whales, which are endangered.

Interior has offered nearly 16.8 million acres of federal land for oil and gas leasing since Trump took office, according to the Center for Biological Diversity — a swath of land larger than the combined size of Maryland and New Jersey. Of those acres, more than 2.3 million were leased, and the department plans to auction off another 1.3 million acres in the spring.

Under Friday's decision, oil and natural gas operations can more easily conduct horizontal drilling in sage grouse habitat.

Sage grouse exist only in the United States. Scientists consider them an indicator species because their status reflects the overall well-being of many animals in the sagebrush sea, which encompasses about 160 million acres across 11 states.

Sixty-seven million of those acres were designated for protection under [a 2015 federal plan](#) designed to increase the bird's population and bring it back from the brink of being placed on the endangered species list. The new decision eliminates or weakens protections on 75 percent of the area in the original plan.

On their expedition across what became the United States, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark noted that flying sage grouse blackened the skies, leading to unconfirmed estimates that their historical numbers stood at 16 million. Since the bird's habitat has been cut in half by human expansion and development, those changes, coupled with invasive species and disease, have shrunk their numbers to fewer than 500,000.

Acting interior secretary David Bernhardt said in a statement that the department's final decision demonstrated that the administration could achieve several goals at once. The new plan will shift significant power to the states, including leaving it up to state officials whether energy companies have to offset the environmental impacts of their development.

"The plans adopted today show that listening to and working with our neighbors at the state and local levels of government is the key to long-term conservation and to ensuring the viability of local communities across the West," Bernhardt said.

Governors from several Western states — including some prominent Democrats — praised the new plan for scaling back restrictions adopted in 2015 and empowering state officials to authorize energy development without imperiling the sage grouse's survival. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D), for example, thanked Interior officials for addressing the state's concerns in a statement, adding, "Our focus now turns to implementation and creating successful outcomes on the ground."

Sam Eaton, policy director and counsel to Idaho Gov. Brad Little (R), said in an interview Friday that the revisions reflect the collaborative process the state had launched under the previous administration that was upended shortly before the 2015 plan was finalized.

"We live, breathe and understand the terrain, the environment, and we have the experts here and know what's best for the species," Eaton said, adding that the state had consulted with biologists as well as industry and other groups when drafting its plan. "While we understand the federal framework, we feel we're best suited to manage the species."

Terry Messmer, a professor of wildlife conflict management at Utah State University, said the 2015 regulations under the Obama administration, resulting from a five-year collaboration between affected states and the Fish and Wildlife Service, was an overstep. He said areas of focus that federal authorities blanketed with protections didn't necessarily need them.

"The folks that are doing the assessments, the state biologists, clearly understand the needs of the birds," Messmer said. "Good, quality habitat will trump the impacts of [human] disturbance." Sage grouse can adapt to the footprint of mining and drilling operations and the electric power grid that follows them."

That view was dismissed by a conservationist who has worked in the sagebrush sea for years. "It's interesting, because we've had repeated letters sent to this administration by the most renowned sage grouse scientists urging them to not walk away from the most valuable habitat, to maintain a commitment to leasing and drilling outside the habitat — all the things that have been abandoned by this record of decision," said Nada Culver, senior counsel for the Wilderness Society.

"Because of the types of designations that were eliminated, the vast majority of protections that remain are weaker," Culver said. "When you add up what's left, it's just so much less."

Ed Arnett, chief scientist for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, said that some of this recent leasing is now taking place in large areas that serve as critical migration corridors for wildlife in the West. "We've seen a dramatic shift away from prioritizing energy leasing away from the best habitat and are now witnessing leasing of some of the very best remaining tracks of un-fragmented land."

Concern for the well-being of animals extends to oil and gas exploration in the sea.

Balash's speech belied the administration's statements that approval of seismic survey permits and the offering of federal leases in the Atlantic are still up in the air. Asked about his February remarks on Thursday, Balash backtracked.

"As these documents are yet to be finalized, no final decisions have been made on the [outer continental shelf] oil and natural gas program," he said.

Offshore drilling in the Atlantic has been a thorny proposition since the administration [proposed it in January 2018](#). Governors along the coast opposed it. Less than a week after announcing the proposal, then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke flew to Florida to guarantee a Republican ally of the president that his state would not be included in the proposal.

The acrimony continues more than a year later. During a contentious hearing in the House last week, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration official defended seismic testing, saying that firing commercial air guns underwater every 10 seconds in search of oil and gas deposits over a period of months would have next to no effect on marine mammals.

When the official, Chris Oliver, an assistant administrator for fisheries, admitted he had never heard the sound of a seismic test, Rep. Joe Cunningham (D-S.C.) [blasted him](#) with an earsplitting air horn and asked if he found it disruptive. Oliver said he didn't.

A spokeswoman for the International Association of Geophysical Contractors said Balash and the administration are simply doing their jobs. “One of the things they’re supposed to be doing is evaluating the potential resources in the outer continental shelf ... so they can make informed decisions about what the next steps should be, whether it’s to lease it for oil and gas exploration or not,” said Gail Adams, vice president of communications for the group. “Seismic surveys provide that data.”