January 13, 2017

Re: Nomination of Representative Ryan Zinke for Secretary of the Interior

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity and our over 1 million members and supporters, we write to express our extreme concern about and opposition to Rep. Ryan Zinke’s nomination to be the next Secretary of Interior. During his short time in Congress Rep. Zinke earned a three percent lifetime rating from the League of Conservation voters out of a possible 100 percent. When given the opportunity, he has voted consistently against protecting America’s public lands, waters and native wildlife while prioritizing the narrow, short-term interests of corporate and extractive industries. He has been a champion of promoting dirty fossil fuel development on public lands, undermining public and environmental review and limiting citizen access to the courts and has consistently voted against protecting our nation's most imperiled species.

The fact that Representative Zinke has publicly made statements opposing giving away America’s public lands is to be lauded. However, that is an extremely low bar against which to judge the person who could become the next leader of the federal agency responsible for our nation’s most important natural legacy. Rep. Zinke has consistently voted against the conservation mandate of the very department that he is being considered to lead.

Zinke's dangerous record on America’s public lands includes:

- Introducing a bill to undo President Obama’s moratorium and review of the federal coal leasing program that would take into account the impacts of federal coal on climate change.
- Proposing a budget rider that would allow some of the world’s biggest coal companies to continue to dodge royalty payments owed to the federal taxpayers.
- Voting for the cynically named, “Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015”, which would turn control of public land over to industry-dominated panels, while dispensing with environmental laws and public involvement in order to ramp up unsustainable logging levels.
- Voting to strip the president of authority to designate national monuments in seven western states. Congress gave the President this authority in recognition that it is often unable or unwilling to move quickly to elevate the conservation status of certain federal lands to protect areas of scientific, natural, cultural and historic interest.
- Voting against public review of hard rock mining on public lands in the so-called “National Strategic and Critical Minerals Production Act of 2015.” The hardrock mining industry already enjoys essentially free access to publicly owned hardrock minerals under the woefully outdated 1872 Mining Law. Limiting the capacity of frontline communities to hold
mining companies accountable in the courts jeopardizes their ability to protect land, water, and public health.

- Voting to block implementing the Bureau of Land Managements hydraulic fracturing rule geared to limit harm to water, air and wildlife from fracking on public lands.
- Voting against providing wilderness protections to the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, an area of global environmental significance under threat from oil and gas developers.
- Voting against a public and environmental review process for grazing permits on drought and fire damaged public lands, that would have ensured public input, accountability and assessment of environmental harm.

Rep. Zinke voted against protecting imperiled wildlife, casting 21 votes against endangered species protections during his two-year tenure in Congress. His troubling record on Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections includes:

- Voting for the premature delisting of Mexican gray wolves. There are only an estimated 100 Mexican wolves left in the wild in New Mexico, with a reported 14 wolves illegally killed in 2016. Stripping federal protections from these wolves against the best available science would surely doom the species to extinction.
- Voting to strip ESA protections from the endangered gray wolf. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed wolves in the lower 48 states as endangered in 1978 after the species was hunted to the brink of extinction. Occupying less than 10 percent of their historic range, wolves contribute to ecological restoration where they have repopulated. Without protections, unchecked hunting and trapping would undo the great recovery that is occurring.
- Voted against regulations designed to crackdown on the black market ivory trade from poaching and trafficking African elephants.
- Voting to defund the unprecedented stakeholder developed, multi-state conservation plans for the Greater Sage-grouse and prevent federal protections of the imperiled bird. The iconic Sage-grouse population has declined over 90 percent from historic levels due to habitat loss and fragmentation.
- Voting for stripping protections from the lesser prairie chicken and the American burying beetle in the National Defense Authorization Bill, whose populations have plummeted due to habitat loss from oil and gas drilling, livestock grazing, and power line construction.
- Voting for giving special-interest agricultural stakeholders more influence during the ESA Section 7 consultation process, putting partisan, non-science based factors above those of imperiled species and skirting the legal requirements of the very law he will be entrusted to enforce.

Zinke has championed greatly increased logging, grazing, mining and oil and gas drilling, greatly reduced environmental protections, elimination of federal authority, and weakening of environmental standards for federal public lands. While he may not support the actual selling or giving away of federal public lands, he does support turning over management of federal public lands to industry-dominated panels appointed by state governors, which would result in similar destruction and degradation to imperiled wildlife, lands and waters. Under such a scheme, the federal government, and taxpayers, would bear the costs through nominal retention of land title.
A Secretary of the Interior should be a steward of America’s federal public lands. Based on his record, Rep. Zinke would not steward American's federal public lands on behalf of this and future generations, but rather accommodate their further development and exploitation for the benefit of corporate interests.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact Randi Spivak on my staff at (310) 779-4894, rspivak@biologicaldiversity.org.

Sincerely,

Kieran Suckling
Executive Director,
Center for Biological Diversity