

## Interior Nominee Zinke to Channel Teddy Roosevelt at Hearing

By Elvina Nawaguna, CQ Roll Call

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President-elect Donald Trump's nominee, Rep. [Ryan Zinke](#), R-Mont., will call himself "an unapologetic admirer of Teddy Roosevelt" who believes "he had it right when he placed under federal protection millions of acres of federal lands and set aside much of it as National forests," according to [prepared testimony](#) released by the Trump transition team.

In the prepared statement, Zinke will lay out three top priorities:

"The first is to restore trust by working with, rather than against, local communities and states. Second, is to prioritize the estimated 12.5 billion dollars in backlog of maintenance and repair in our National Parks. And third, to ensure the professionals on the front line, our rangers and field managers, have the right tools, right resources, and flexibility to make the right decisions that give a voice to the people they serve."

The first of those priorities will please Republicans who have criticized President Barack Obama for what they call heavy-handed dealing with local officials in areas protected from development by federal land restrictions. Democrats can be expected to push back against the accusations of heavy-handedness, and probe for Zinke's views on the proper balance of local and federal authority.

And by citing the \$12.5 billion maintenance backlog, Zinke may get his first inkling of the Republicans' appetite for spending on park repairs.

As one of the least contentious of President-elect Donald Trump's nominees Zinke heads into his confirmation hearing with little of the controversy surrounding other Cabinet picks.

Still, he will face critical questioning from Democrats on the committee who are wary of — if not outright opposed to — plans by Trump to expand oil and gas drilling on public lands and in offshore waters managed by the Interior Department. The Montana Republican will also face concerns that the department is not getting a fair return for taxpayers from fossil fuel extraction.

The committee's top Democrat, [Maria Cantwell](#) of Washington, has yet to make any statement for or against Zinke in advance of the hearing. Chairwoman [Lisa Murkowski](#) of Alaska told reporters she does not expect fireworks.

Zinke has sponsored legislation to permanently authorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and voted against the transfer of federal lands to states — stances that have earned him a measure of respect from environmental groups. Those stances have appeared to tamp down immediate opposition.

"I've talked to many of my colleagues in the committee, and had an opportunity to visit with Mr. Zinke," Murkowski told reporters Thursday. "Nobody has flagged to me that there is going to be some high-profile issue that is going to just blow up."

## Tribal Relationship

Zinke in his prepared testimony also claimed close ties to the Assiniboine-Sioux Tribe of Fort Peck, Mont., saying he would be “a champion” of native nations.

Tribal rights have reemerged as a contentious issue recently as tribes across the nation fight the construction of energy projects across their lands.

Zinke could have to explain how he would balance championing tribal issues, while fulfilling Trump's promise to open up more public lands to fossil fuel extraction.

In the Interior post, Zinke, 55, would direct oversight of the nation's vast public lands. The department's land holdings are largely in the West, and it also oversees millions of Outer Continental Shelf acres.

In line with other Trump nominees who will oversee environment and energy regulation, Zinke has faced critical reviews from the environmental lobby for his support for the fossil fuel industry. He had a 3 percent score from the League of Conservation Voters based on selected votes in his first term.

Yet some have acknowledged his interest in keeping public lands in government hands and efforts to ensure funding for conservation programs.

“We appreciate the constructive steps Rep. Zinke has taken on behalf of stewardship and conservation in his home state of Montana and across America,” said Fred Krupp, the president of the Environmental Defense Fund, when Zinke was named by Trump in December. “For example, he has shown independence from anti-environmental Republicans in Congress, pushing back on a number of damaging policies and declaring the sale of our public lands ‘a non-starter’ — a crucially important stance.”

Democratic responses to Zinke have been measured in contrast to the criticism directed at Trump's other energy and environment picks, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt for the Environmental Protection Agency and former Texas Gov. Rick Perry for the Energy Department.

“I am encouraged by indications that Rep. [Ryan Zinke](#) recognizes the importance of keeping our public lands in public ownership, as well as his apparent support of making the Land and Water Conservation Fund permanent,” Sen. [Ron Wyden](#), D-Ore., a senior Democrat on the Energy panel and its former chairman, said last month.

Wyden said he plans to ask Zinke how he would ensure that public lands can continue to be a source of local job creation through outdoor recreation opportunities and sustainable development of renewable energy, and how he would ensure energy resources produced on federal lands “deliver a fair return to American taxpayers.”

On that subject, Zinke will field questions about his support for the coal industry and on the Interior Department's recent decision to continue a moratorium on new federal coal mining leases while it studies fee increases and other changes. Democrats will demand some commitment from him to continue the study, though Zinke opposed the moratorium as a member of the House Natural Resources Committee.

Questions about a news report that Zinke allegedly committed travel fraud during his time as a Navy SEAL could trip him, if it comes up, but the issue is not expected to derail his confirmation.

“He has impressed me with how he handles himself with the questions and issues, so I'm hopeful for a good, thorough hearing on Tuesday and then we can wrap it up,” Murkowski said last week. “He certainly understands the imperative that we are able to access our energy resources for the benefit of the country.”