

The Oregonian

Norton left conservation out in the wilderness

The Interior secretary spent five years

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prying open the nation's public lands for commercial development

There is no oil, no gas, no coal, no timber in Oregon's Spring Basin -- no reason, then, for Interior Secretary Gale Norton to give any thought to the rolling hills of sage and bluebunch wheatgrass along the breaks of the John Day River.

Norton, who resigned Friday, had no time for conservation. She served five years as a pleasant, persistent advocate of expanding coal mining and oil and gas drilling on public lands. She was, as The Seattle Times said Tuesday, "James Watt with a smile."

Norton never had a smile for conservation, though. And if you go looking for Norton's legacy, you'll find it not only in the oil rigs drilling into the Rockies, or in the weakened National Park system, but in beautiful and fragile lands like Spring Basin.

Spring Basin is nearly 9,000 acres of Oregon High Desert bounded by the John Day River and a wildlife reserve managed by the Warm Springs tribes. Virtually everyone who lives around this land, who cares for it, who knows it, believes strongly that it should be protected wilderness.

The rural and conservative Wheeler County Court has endorsed the Spring Basin wilderness plan put together by the Oregon Natural Desert Association. So have the nearby ranchers and landowners who have agreed to a series of complicated land trades that would block up the public land and provide critical public access to the John Day River.

Spring Basin should be protected wilderness by now. The only reason it isn't is that Norton, the Bush administration and the Republican majority in Congress have shown little or no interest in conservation, even when everyone who knows the land in question agrees that it should be protected.

Congressman Greg Walden, R-Ore., once drafted a bill that would have designated Spring Basin as wilderness, but he never introduced it. Walden is now engaged in a plan to protect parts of Mount Hood and surrounding forests. New desert wilderness, both at Spring Basin and the Badlands near Bend, seems no longer to be a priority for Walden, or anyone else in the federal government.

That, too, is part of Norton's legacy. So is the political interference with biologists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So is the exposure of 2.6 million acres of previously protected public lands to commercial development.

As Norton leaves her job, the Senate is prepared to debate today for the umpteenth time the administration's dream of opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. It's fitting that Norton leaves to the sounds of another shrill debate on her plan to despoil one of the last great wildlife lands in the United States, while precious few voices in Congress speak up for conserving the nation's desert wilderness.