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opinion

# Parting shot

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Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton, who gave notice of her resignation two weeks ago, could simply have ridden off quietly into the sunset. Instead, she chose to launch one final, potentially devastating assault on the vast and precious public lands within her domain.

Under sweeping guidelines Ms. Norton issued Wednesday, state and county governments across the West are invited to stake their claim to any old trail or closed road through national parks, wilderness and rangeland with implicit assurance that federal managers will approve upgrades of such pathways into major thoroughfares.

She thus reversed a decade-old policy of sharply limiting such upgrades to instances in which there is a compelling public purpose, reflecting the goal of her tenure to topple conservation from its perch as first among competing priorities for public lands.

Senators ought to extract a promise from Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne to void the roadway giveaway before confirming his nomination as Ms. Norton's replacement.

As is typically the case, Ms. Norton explained her new policy in the most reasonable terms, saying she was implementing a 2005 Circuit Court of Appeals decision that sorted through

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the legal tangle caused when Congress voted in 1976 to repeal a century-old law that encouraged road-building on federal land to promote settlement of the West.

By 1976, national priorities had shifted to conservation and protection of public land, particularly pristine wilderness areas and parks. Congress allowed that rights-of-way established before 1976 could still be developed as roads, but left it to the courts to resolve disputes.

Courts still have the last word. But Ms. Norton seized on Circuit Court language allowing her department to offer tentative rulings to encourage such appeals in a way that will put enormous pressure on bullied and dispirited Interior employees to grant any requests that come their way.

Amazingly, there are still folks within the ranks of the Interior Department who love nature and wildlife and believe in the mission to protect them. Those folks deserve much better than Ms. Norton's parting shot.

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