

Dickenson: From the Rockies to the Beltway, Colorado's influence in Washington

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By Tiffany Dickenson | Guest Commentary, Rocky Mountain Voice

Colorado has long punched above its weight in shaping national policy, and this administration is no different. With the appointment of Chris Wright as Secretary of Energy, our state once again finds itself in a key position of influence in Washington, D.C.

Our state has a proud history of representation at the highest levels of government. Through the years, several Coloradans have taken the lead on national issues, leaving a legacy of strong, values-driven leadership:

- **Federico Peña**, as Secretary of Transportation (1993-1997), modernized infrastructure, including airport and transportation networks vital to rural areas like Northwest Colorado. Later, as Secretary of Energy (1997-1998), he balanced renewable energy development with the stability of traditional energy sectors critical to Colorado's economy.
- **Gale Norton**, the first woman to serve as Secretary of the Interior (2001-2006), led efforts to balance conservation with resource development, addressing public lands issues central to Northwest Colorado. Her collaborative approach as Colorado Attorney General brought tangible benefits to rural communities dependent on natural resources and recreation.
- **Ken Salazar** carried the torch as Secretary of the Interior (2009-2013), prioritizing water conservation and renewable energy, supporting projects like the first offshore wind farms while safeguarding water rights essential to the Western Slope. His deep understanding of Colorado's challenges resonated in Northwest Colorado, where energy and water resources drive the economy.

- **Neil Gorsuch**, a Denver native and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court (2017–present), has made decisions on water rights and federal land use that reflect a perspective shaped by Colorado's Western values. His understanding of rural and environmental issues is vital to communities across Northwest Colorado.
- **David Bernhardt**, as Secretary of the Interior (2019–2021), emphasized energy development, streamlining regulations that directly benefited energy production in Northwest Colorado. A Rifle native, Bernhardt's personal connection to the area informed policies that supported public lands and local economies. Fun fact: AGNC's Immediate Past Chair, Garfield County Commissioner Mike Samson, taught Bernhardt Civics in high school –a testament to Colorado's tightly-knit communities!

Now, with **Chris Wright** stepping into the role of Secretary of Energy, Colorado's tradition of shaping national policy continues. Wright's strong ties to the state's energy economy underscore the vital role of Northwest Colorado in driving the nation's energy future.

As CEO of Denver-based Liberty Energy, Wright has been a relentless advocate for energy independence and innovation. He is perhaps best known for his [viral video calling out The North Face](#) for its reliance on petroleum-based products, a moment that underscored his unapologetic defense of the oil and gas industry. His leadership has helped establish Liberty Energy as a key player in advancing hydraulic fracturing technology and promoting responsible energy development.

Wright's appointment is a continuation of Colorado's history of leadership in energy policy. His approach emphasizes not only the critical role of fossil fuels in America's energy mix but also the need to adapt existing infrastructure for new technologies. Wright's track record makes him uniquely equipped to lead the Department of Energy as it navigates a complex future.

The Western Slope and Northwest Colorado have long been the backbone of Colorado's energy economy, powering homes, businesses, and industries across the nation. From the coal fields of Moffat and Routt Counties to the natural gas reserves in the Piceance Basin, this region is a cornerstone of America's energy independence.

Northwest Colorado's energy contributions are unmatched in their diversity and scale. The coal-fired power plants in Craig have not only generated reliable electricity for decades, but have also provided hundreds of well-paying jobs that supported families and communities. Natural Soda's process for extracting the mineral by the use of boilers powered by natural gas is leading the industry in clean extraction. As the coal era winds down, the region's focus on natural gas and nuclear power reflects its ability to adapt and lead in a changing energy landscape.

Oil and gas production has also been a lifeline for the Western Slope, with countless families and businesses thriving thanks to the industry's strong presence. Beyond providing fuel, the sector has invested in local communities through infrastructure projects, education programs, and economic diversification efforts.

Looking forward, the region is poised to embrace new energy opportunities, including the potential for small modular nuclear reactors. A recent survey by the Northwest Colorado Energy Initiative (NCEI) revealed strong local support for nuclear power as a way to sustain energy production and economic activity in the region following the closure of the Craig coal plant. With 88.5% of residents in Moffat, Routt and Rio Blanco counties favoring nuclear energy (61% strongly favor), it's clear that Northwest Colorado is ready to lead in adopting innovative energy solutions.

These findings align with Wright's unapologetic advocacy for a balanced energy approach—leveraging existing infrastructure while embracing new technologies. A NCEI [op-ed published](#) earlier this year was inspired by the Key Takeaways from Liberty Energy's 2024 [Bettering Human Lives](#) Annual Report. Wright's appointment to the Department of Energy underscores the importance of this conversation and the stakes for Colorado's communities.

The ingenuity and resilience of Northwest Colorado have always ensured its place at the forefront of America's energy story, and leaders like Wright exemplify the spirit of innovation that drives the region forward. Let's keep supporting the leaders who ensure Colorado's voice remains strong and who champion the industries that fuel our nation.

As Wright heads to Washington, DC, Colorado can take pride in once again sending a leader to the national stage. His perspective is deeply rooted in our state's values – innovation, resourcefulness, and a commitment to the responsible development of our energy resources.

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