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## 11th-Hour Ruling Blocks Utah Oil and Gas Leases

**By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)**

A federal judge on Saturday blocked oil and natural gas exploration on tens of thousands of acres of federal land in [Utah](#), saying in an 11th-hour decision that the [Interior Department](#) had not done sufficient environmental analysis, particularly of how air quality might be degraded.

The decision by the judge, Ricardo M. Urbina of Federal District Court in Washington, granted a temporary restraining order sought by seven environmental groups to prevent oil and gas companies from taking possession of leases they had purchased Dec. 19.

The [Bureau of Land Management](#) could have cashed the checks from the winning bidders on Monday; at that point the leases would have become final.

The number of tracts available for lease in Utah had been reduced by the bureau late last fall after the [National Park Service](#) objected to plans to lease hundreds of acres near Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park.

But the scaled-back proposal still included land within sight of the parks, as well as land in and around Nine Mile Canyon, an area with well-preserved pre-Columbian rock art.

“Because of the threat of irreparable harm to public land if the leases are issued,” Judge Urbina wrote, “the balancing of equities also tips in favor” of the environmental groups that brought the lawsuit.

Heidi McIntosh, a lawyer with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, one of the groups that sued, said in an e-mail message, “The judge’s order saves some of the most spectacular landscapes in the nation — lands within a stone’s throw of two national parks — from being turned into oil and gas fields.”

Kathleen Sgamma, the government affairs director of the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, said the decision was “a setback for energy security.”

“We feel adequate analysis and protections were in place,” Ms. Sgamma added.

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