

Drilling in Utah

Obama looks to undo Bush damage

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Utah, as usual, got little personal attention from either presidential candidate during the 2008 campaign. No doubt it seems to both parties a waste of time, given that Utah is one of the reddest states in the union with nothing to indicate any move toward blue or even purple.

But now Utah is in President-elect Barack Obama's sightline as he zeros in on Bush administration rules that he wants to change by executive order. Obama wants to act quickly to undo, if he can, the Bureau of Land Management's rush to sell oil and gas leases, including on large swaths of public lands near Arches and Canyonlands national parks and Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. We believe he should take every possible action to do so.

The BLM announced a Dec. 19 lease sale targeting 360,000 Utah acres, some on lands the BLM itself has designated as having wilderness qualities. Tracts near the scenic vistas of Desolation Canyon and adjacent to Nine Mile Canyon, prized for its ancient petroglyphs, are also on the auction block.

The president-to-be and his advisers are not the only ones critical of the Bush BLM's plan to allow oil and gas wells alongside the pristine outdoor recreation playgrounds. The National Park Service has been cut out of the process and understandably wants to know why.

Usually when a BLM lease proposal has potential impact on national parks, the NPS is notified and given anywhere from one to three months to review the plan and comment on it.

Except this time. When the BLM first released maps to the NPS showing lands that would be included in the Dec. 19 sale, the controversial tracts near the parks and monument were not among them.

Only when revised maps were made public on Election Day did the park service find out that oil and gas rigs might soon mar the vistas that hikers, backpackers, cyclists and other recreationists see from inside park boundaries. And that wildlife wandering from the protection of the parks could encounter the disruption of roads, vehicles, machinery and drilling rigs.

The NPS requested the BLM postpone the December sale to give the agency time to formulate a response, but the request was flatly refused. Seemingly nothing will be allowed to stand in the way.

President Bush's mandate that agencies overseeing public lands "eliminate obstacles in the way of drilling" is being followed off a cliff in the last weeks of his presidency. We can only hope that after Jan. 20, Obama will be able to reverse some of the damage.