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Drilling in Utah

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One last gift to the oil and gas industry

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USING THE WANING days of power to ram through rules and regulations to burnish a legacy or preempt a successor is a time-honored tradition of outgoing administrations. That [President Bush's White House](#) is no exception was demonstrated by last week's announcement by the [Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\)](#) that it would authorize the sale of oil and gas leases on 360,000 acres of public land in Utah. Many of the tracts are disturbingly close to national parks and some of the nation's most beautiful vistas.

The 241 parcels are clustered around or near Dinosaur National Monument, Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park and will be auctioned on Dec. 19. While energy exploration is not prohibited on lands under the jurisdiction of the BLM, a mix of public pressure and political considerations pushed previous administrations to resist industrial development around national parks. In another departure from past practice, the [National Park Service](#), which usually is given up to three months to comment on proposed sales of leases near parks, was not consulted. According to published reports, the agency found out about the sale from an environmental group. A request before the sale announcement to pull the parcels near parks until further study of drilling's impact on wildlife, air and water was initially rejected. Since then, the BLM and the National Park Service have come to an agreement that allows the Park Service to conduct a parcel-by-parcel review of the tracts in question that will be completed by Nov. 24. What happens after that is up in the air.

The lands put up for leasing were proposed by the oil and gas industry. The BLM then conducted a series of environmental reviews under various laws, including the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. That the National Park Service was cut out of the consultation loop only amplifies the administration's reputation for holding the interests of industry above all others. The 30-day "public protest period" ends Dec. 4. If the leases are sold and handed over before Jan. 20, the administration of President-elect [Barack Obama](#) will have trouble reversing them.

The United States has an abiding appetite for fossil fuels -- a dangerous affliction that will continue until alternative energy sources can be exploited on a much larger scale. For some time to come, it will be imperative that the country increase domestic oil production to reduce its dependence on imports. That will mean balancing environmental concerns. After all, oil production in Venezuela, Nigeria and Russia also causes environmental damage. That doesn't mean, however, that important environmental factors should be given short shrift or that the views of potentially critical players ought to be ignored. That is what the Bush administration has done in the case of the Utah leases.

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