

Halt lease sale

Sensitive lands on BLM hit list

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Sometimes the best thing to do is ... nothing.

That's what the Bureau of Land Management should do with its Dec. 19 sale of drilling leases on public land in Utah. The sale includes too many parcels that should be protected from the impacts of drilling, including areas in Nine Mile and Desolation canyons and other wilderness-quality lands.

Groups concerned about the state's lucrative outdoor recreation industry, organizations worried about land and archaeology conservation, members of President-elect Barack Obama's transition team and even the BLM's sister federal agency, the National Park Service, have criticized the sale. To give everyone time to comment on their particular concerns, the sale should be postponed indefinitely.

That's not apt to happen, though, since the Bush administration has given orders to put the Republican mantra "drill, baby, drill" into action in the West, no matter the consequences or who is opposed to sacrificing America's treasures on the altar of the fossil-fuel gods.

The White House clearly wants to deliver as many acres as possible to the energy-development industry before Bush leaves office in January. And Utah's congressional delegation has shamefully supported this headlong dash to open millions more acres to drilling, never mind that energy companies already hold thousands of unused public-land leases.

The Park Service at least managed to convince the BLM to take parcels off the auction block that are within sight of Canyonlands and Arches national parks and along the main approach to Dinosaur National Monument. And an insidious plan to allow drilling under private homes in Moab was halted. But too many other sensitive landscapes remain at risk, and it inspires no trust when the BLM says some of those on the list *might* be reconsidered.

The agency also rushed to get resource management plans completed before the Bush administration leaves Washington. The reason for the BLM's haste has become apparent as the RMPs have been unveiled. The plans, overall, substantially increase the acreage available for drilling and off-road-vehicle use.

An outspoken critic of BLM land-use policy is Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., who is on the short list for secretary of the interior. Grijalva, who understands the challenges of protecting public lands, would be an excellent choice.

But whoever takes the reins should, with the full backing of the new president, act decisively to undo Bush's destructive land-use policies.