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58 House members urge Obama to scrap lease sales in Utah

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Fifty-eight U.S. House members wrote Barack Obama on Monday asking him to cancel just-auctioned-but-not-yet-finalized oil and gas leases in Utah, and asked him to dump new resource management plans that allowed those auctions last week.

"We believe the next Interior Department should revise these terribly unbalanced management plans and cancel the inappropriate oil and gas leases that flowed from these decisions," they wrote.

Helping to lead the letter-writing effort was Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., who for years has sponsored a bill, which he calls America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, to create about 9.5 million acres of wilderness (covering about one fifth of all land area in Utah) on U.S. Bureau of Land Management areas in the state.

The letter complained that the new oil and gas leases include 60,000 acres that are proposed for wilderness protection in Hinchey's bill. The letter contends the Bush administration rushed to offer the leases before it leaves office and did not consult with the National Park Service and others about how it may impact sensitive lands.

"We would like to encourage you to act quickly to protect these wilderness-quality public lands from the devastating and irreversible environmental impacts of oil and gas drilling," the letter to Obama said.

"Unless the Obama-Biden administration acts to reverse these RMPs (resource management plans), these plans will dictate oil and gas leasing activity and off-road vehicle use for over 11 million acres of public land for the next 15-20 years," they wrote.

They added, "We strongly urge the Obama-Biden administration take decisive action and either halt the leasing process for wild public lands in Utah proposed for wilderness designation in Congress, or, if the leases have already been issued, cancel these improperly issued leases and refund the high bidders' monies."

Hinchey and the other letter signers may have reason to hope. Shortly after the election, John Podesta, Obama's transition chief, said Obama is reviewing using executive order powers to reverse decisions to allow oil and gas drilling on sensitive lands in Utah.

Republicans in Utah's congressional delegation criticized Podesta's comments at the time. For example, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said, "To place Utah lands off-limits for oil and gas exploration costs Utahns jobs and is bad for the economy."

However, Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, said Obama officials are concerned over one controversial set of leases that may not have had proper review, and believes they will not try to make new exploration off-limits in all areas.

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