

Groups protest drilling-lease auction in Utah

By PAUL FOY, Associated Press Writer Paul Foy, Associated Press Writer Thu Dec 4, 10:25 pm ET

SALT LAKE CITY – Conservation groups filed formal protests Thursday against what they call a "fire sale" of oil-and-gas drilling leases in Utah being conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society and the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance filed their objections to drilling in 100,000 acres of wild land in eastern Utah.

The BLM has already pulled nearly 100,000 acres from the Dec. 19 auction, leaving more than 276,000 acres up for bid.

The BLM has been under intense pressure — first from the National Park Service and now from conservation groups — to cull a list of auction parcels in Utah's final oil-and-gas lease sale of President George W. Bush's administration.

Last week, the BLM pulled drilling leases that were located on and around the borders of Arches National Park, Dinosaur National Monument and Canyonlands National Park, all in Utah.

Then, on Tuesday, the BLM removed some auction parcels from Nine Mile Canyon, home to thousands of ancient rock art panels, and nearby Desolation Canyon on the Green River, while continuing plans to lease other parcels near both canyons and in other wild areas of Utah.

"This is the Christmas sale, the Bush administration's last great gift to the oil and gas industry," said Stephen Bloch, an attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

The conservation groups object to leasing around Desolation and Labyrinth canyons, a favorite of Green River rafters, and other parcels near Canyonlands National Park. They were joined by the Colorado-based Outdoor Industry Association, which filed its own objections.

"Our businesses and livelihoods rely on the remote nature of these stretches of river and their abundance of wildlife, natural quiet, clean air, dark skies and wild qualities," said Amy Roberts, vice president of government affairs for the organization, which represents 4,000 manufacturers, distributors and retailers.

Separately, the fishermen's group Trout Unlimited said it was objecting to lease sales near the remote Deep Creek Mountains in Utah's western desert. Trout Unlimited says drilling threatens recovery programs for native Bonneville cutthroat trout.

Terry Catlin, energy team leader for the Utah office of the BLM, acknowledged that pressure placed on the agency after it announced its original leasing plans influenced the bureau's two reversals over the past 10 days.

"I think clearly it's a factor, especially in terms of another Interior agency raising concerns. We took the Park Service concerns quite seriously, and you see the result on the parcels that were dropped," she said.

The BLM has set Dec. 12 for announcing what additional parcels, if any, it plans to drop from the auction.