

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 26, 2004

The Honorable Gale A. Norton  
Secretary of the Interior  
1849 C. Street, NW  
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Norton:

As cosponsors of S. 639, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, we are writing to express our concern about the Bureau of Land Management's continuing practice of offering for sale oil and gas lease tracts situated within areas that would be designated as federally protected wilderness by S. 639. We urge you to forgo issuance of future leases in areas that would be preserved as wilderness by S. 639. We also ask that you cancel any leases that were issued at the February 18, 2004, Utah sale that are within areas that our legislation would designate as wilderness areas under the Wilderness Act of 1964.

As you are no doubt aware, the disposition of the last remaining Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wild lands in Utah is a critical issue that Congress must ultimately resolve. We have proposed to address this matter by supporting legislation that would permanently protect areas that have been identified for their wilderness characteristics by the BLM itself, and additional areas deserving of wilderness protection identified by Utah citizens knowledgeable about the wilderness values of the land.

The Department of the Interior's decision to open up the unresolved public lands to oil and gas exploration will result in the conveyance of development rights to the oil and gas industry before Congress has the opportunity to make a determination on their suitability as wilderness. We are concerned that the Department's actions will lead to impairment that may permanently disqualify these lands from wilderness designation. These actions violate the spirit of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which was to provide Congress the opportunity to protect sensitive lands in their pristine state for future generations.

We therefore ask that you (a) cancel pending February 18 oil and gas leases for all tracts that fall within the areas that would be protected by S. 639, and (b) direct the BLM to refrain from offering lease tracts within the boundaries of areas proposed for wilderness designation in S. 639 in the future, pending congressional action on America's Red Rock Wilderness Act.

We note that if the lease tracts that fall within the areas that would be protected by S. 639 were removed from the February 18 lease sale, the BLM would still be able to proceed with the sale of at least 34 tracts, covering approximately 35,430 acres. By concentrating future oil and gas lease sales in Utah on areas outside those proposed for wilderness, the Administration will be providing the oil and gas industry with opportunities for developing federal oil and gas resources in Utah without irretrievably committing federal resources in areas deserving consideration for wilderness protection. The adoption of such a policy would restore balance to the BLM's stewardship of our public lands: allowing for utilization of natural resources while protecting sensitive lands.

We are hopeful that you will exercise your discretionary authority under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act to "...preserve and protect certain public lands in their natural condition." Thank you for considering our request.

We look forward to your prompt attention to this critical and timely issue.

Sincerely,

Bill D.

Russell A. Feingold

John

Jack Reed

Frank R. Lautenberg

Barack P. Roper

Tom Harkin

Maria Cantwell

Non Wyden

Charles Schumer

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Ed Markey