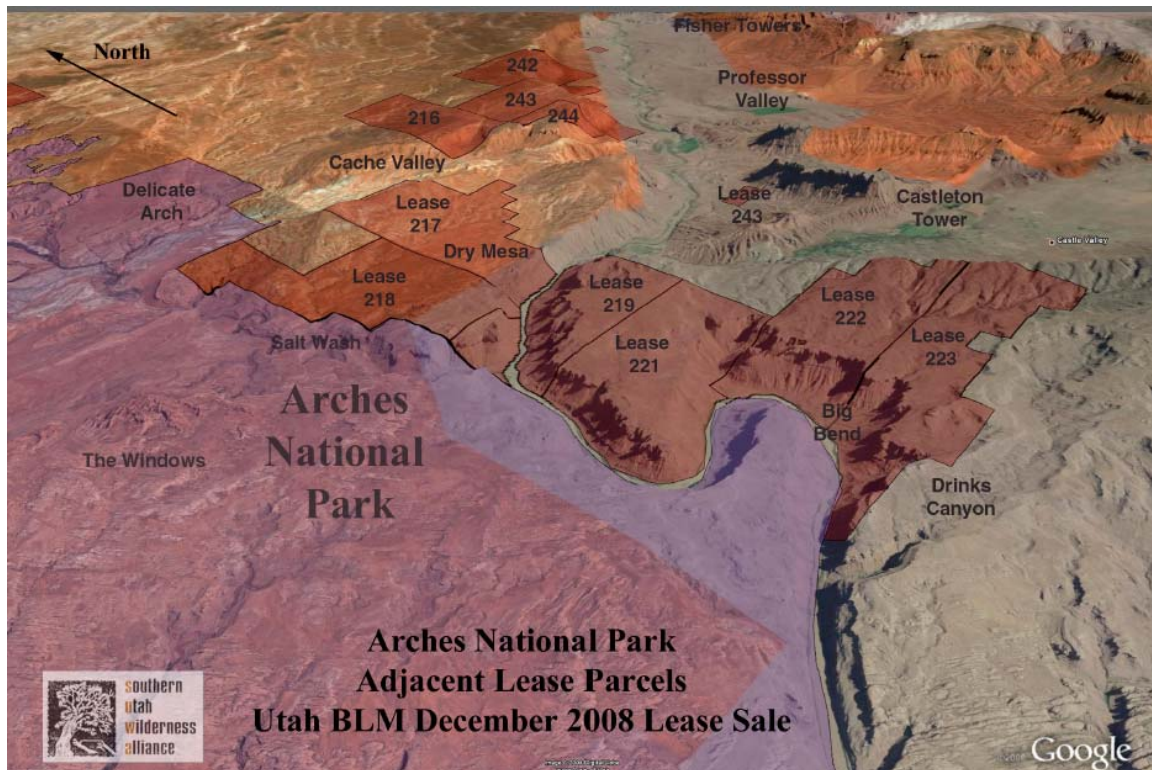


Bush Administration Finalizes its Assault on America's Redrock Wilderness



Enclosed, please find media clips from the last several months drawing attention to the last-minute, short-sighted changes the Bush administration is finalizing for the management of Utah's public lands on its way out the door, highlighted by a 360,000 acre oil and gas lease sale of wilderness quality lands around some of the crown jewels of the National Park System. The Salt Lake Tribune recently editorialized against this new decision to offer leases.

"But now Utah is in President-elect Barack Obama's sightline as he zeros in on Bush administration rules that he wants to change by executive order. Obama wants to act quickly to undo, if he can, the Bureau of Land Management's rush to sell oil and gas leases, including on large swaths of public lands near Arches and Canyonlands national parks and Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. We believe he should take every possible action to do so."

- Salt Lake Tribune Editorial "Drilling in Utah" - November 11, 2008

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The Washington Post

Drilling in Utah One last gift to the oil and gas industry

Thursday, November 13, 2008

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.

The New York Times

Another Parting Gift

November 7, 2008
New York Times Editorial

Gale Norton has to be happy. In 2003, Ms. Norton, then President Bush's secretary of the interior (and now a senior oil executive at Royal Dutch Shell), struck a deal with the governor of Utah that would open about 3 million pristine acres of federal land to oil and gas drilling.

Environmental groups and the courts managed to keep the drillers at bay. No longer. In the last few days, the Bureau of Land Management has completed six long-range management plans for Utah that will expose these acres (and as many as 6 million more) to some form of commercial exploitation.

On Tuesday, the bureau announced that it would soon begin selling oil and gas leases — essentially the right to drill — in some of the most beautiful and fragile areas.

Conservationists are aghast, and rightly so. Apparently without consulting the National Parks Service, one of its sister agencies at the Interior Department, the bureau plans to auction more than two dozen leases adjacent to Arches National Park and very close to Canyonlands National Park, risking the parks' air and water.

Also on the auction block, among other rare and spectacular vistas, is Desolation Canyon, so named by the explorer John Wesley Powell in 1869 while he traveled down the Green River to the Grand Canyon.

This sort of pillage would be hard to justify even if Utah's reserves were large enough to make a difference, which they are not. The Energy Information Administration says that Utah has 2.5 percent of the country's known natural gas reserves and less than 1 percent of its known oil reserves. And even if those reserves were worth going after, it would still be essential to protect areas of special cultural, scenic and recreational value.

The Interior Department's writ is to manage the public lands for "multiple uses," a difficult and ambiguous task. The Clinton administration issued many leases but tried hard to balance the competing claims of commerce and nature; the Bush administration heard only the voice of Vice President Dick Cheney and his one-sided mantra of "drill now, drill everywhere."

This is but the latest of President Bush's last-minute assaults on the environment. The incoming Obama administration will have to quickly review and reverse these decisions or find ways to mitigate the damage

The Salt Lake Tribune

Drilling in Utah Obama looks to undo Bush damage

Tribune Editorial
November 11, 2008

Utah, as usual, got little personal attention from either presidential candidate during the 2008 campaign. No doubt it seems to both parties a waste of time, given that Utah is one of the reddest states in the union with nothing to indicate any move toward blue or even purple.

But now Utah is in President-elect Barack Obama's sightline as he zeros in on Bush administration rules that he wants to change by executive order. Obama wants to act quickly to undo, if he can, the Bureau of Land Management's rush to sell oil and gas leases, including on large swaths of public lands near Arches and Canyonlands national parks and Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. We believe he should take every possible action to do so.

The BLM announced a Dec. 19 lease sale targeting 360,000 Utah acres, some on lands the BLM itself has designated as having wilderness qualities. Tracts near the scenic vistas of Desolation Canyon and adjacent to Nine Mile Canyon, prized for its ancient petroglyphs, are also on the auction block.

The president-to-be and his advisers are not the only ones critical of the Bush BLM's plan to allow oil and gas wells alongside the pristine outdoor recreation playgrounds. The National Park Service has been cut out of the process and understandably wants to know why.

Usually when a BLM lease proposal has potential impact on national parks, the NPS is notified and given anywhere from one to three months to review the plan and comment on it. Except this time. When the BLM first released maps to the NPS showing lands that would be included in the Dec. 19 sale, the controversial tracts near the parks and monument were not among them.

Only when revised maps were made public on Election Day did the park service find out that oil and gas rigs might soon mar the vistas that hikers, backpackers, cyclists and other recreationists see from inside park boundaries. And that wildlife wandering from the protection of the parks could encounter the disruption of roads, vehicles, machinery and drilling rigs.

The NPS requested the BLM postpone the December sale to give the agency time to formulate a response, but the request was flatly refused. Seemingly nothing will be allowed to stand in the way.

President Bush's mandate that agencies overseeing public lands "eliminate obstacles in the way of drilling" is being followed off a cliff in the last weeks of his presidency. We can only hope that after Jan. 20, Obama will be able to reverse some of the damage.

Oily interest

Heard about plans to drill near three national parks in Utah? Neither had the National Park Service

Published on Friday, Nov 14, 2008

One rule long applied in Washington goes something like this: When you want to escape notice, make your move under the cover of bigger news. Thus, the federal Bureau of Land Management chose Election Day to announce the expansion of its oil-and-gas lease program in eastern Utah.

Why would the bureau seek to avoid attention? The proposed expansion invites controversy, to say the least. The bureau has targeted tens of thousands of acres close to three national parks, Arches National Park, Dinosaur National Monument and Canyonlands National Park. Those who have visited or merely seen photographs of these lands know their magnificence, desolate, pristine wonders, just what Teddy Roosevelt had in mind when he pushed for preserving the country's natural heritage.

Logic suggests the National Park Service would have a leading role in advising the bureau about the lease locations. Ordinarily, park officials received three months to offer their assessment. In this instance, dismayingly enough, the bureau barely consulted at all, one news report indicating the park service learned about the effort through a tip from an environmental organization. The park service now has launched an accelerated review. That hardly erases the unease about the bureau's initiative.

The Bush White House rejects criticism about its bowing too readily to oil-and-gas interests. Yet this episode all but confirms the deepest fears of critics.

In the presidential campaign, both Barack Obama and John McCain conveyed a willingness to compromise, bending in their opposition to offshore drilling for oil. Each spoke about balance in an energy strategy. That balance must include giving the likes of the park service sufficient time to weigh the environmental impact, the potential disruption to air, water, wildlife and the vistas so long, and wisely, protected.

At this point, the reasonable course would involve giving the park service (not to mention other interested parties) more time to make a full evaluation. Keep in mind that these lands hardly contain a rich trove of oil and gas, amounting to an estimated 1 percent or 2 percent of the country's reserves. Surely, thought should be given to the exchange: All of the potential turmoil for a relative teaspoon?

Unfortunately, the Bureau of Land Management appears determined to press forward with an auction of the lands next month, the Bush team paying little heed to the repudiation of its ways on Election Day.

This battle may seem far removed from Ohio. John Seiberling knew better. When he served in the U.S. House in the 1980s, the Akron Democrat held field hearings in these Utah lands, highlighting then the misguided doings of the bureau. He knew the stakes. Mar these gorgeous lands, and you risk doing so forever. Thus, care must be taken. A decision shouldn't be rushed, or driven by a desire to make a political point late in an unpopular administration.

The Washington Post

Bureau Proposes Opening Up Utah Wilderness to Drilling

By Juliet Eilperin
Friday, October 31, 2008

The federal Bureau of Land Management is reviving plans to sell oil and gas leases in pristine wilderness areas in eastern Utah that have long been protected from development, according to a notice posted this week on the agency's Web site.

The proposed sale, which includes famous areas in the Nine Mile Canyon region, would take place Dec. 19, a month before President Bush leaves office. The targeted areas include parts of Desolation Canyon, White River, Diamond Mountain and Bourdette Draw.

The bureau has sought to open these public lands to energy exploration since 2003, though it had earlier classified them as having "wilderness character." But the agency has been repeatedly blocked by federal court and administrative rulings.

"Previous administrations proved that there can be a balance between wilderness protection and oil and gas development," said former bureau director Jim Baca, who served under former President Clinton, in a statement. "Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has worked tirelessly to appease the oil and gas industry no matter the cost to our national heritage of wild and untamed places."

Terry Catlin, the bureau's energy team leader for Utah, said it has not finalized the list of lease sites but bases them on "industry

nominations" and provides a 30-day comment period before the sale.

"At the end of the 30-day protest period, we look at the protests and make our final decision at this point," Catlin said in a telephone interview yesterday. "There isn't anything unusual about this timing. We do a lease sale every three months."

The agency will publish the list of lease sites Tuesday. In a notice being published today in the Federal Register, the bureau says it is finalizing five resource management plans applying to about 9.5 million acres, a required step for parts of the sale to go forward.

One of the areas set to be auctioned off is Upper Desolation Canyon, which was named by explorer John Wesley Powell in 1869 while he traveled down the Green River, which traverses the canyon, to the Grand Canyon.

In a 1999 assessment, bureau officials wrote that Desolation Canyon "is a place where a visitor can experience true solitude -- where the forces of nature continue to shape the colorful, rugged landscape," and heralded the area's "cultural, scenic, geologic, botanical, and wildlife values."

"What makes this action by the Interior Department so deplorable is that BLM itself determined these areas to be wilderness-quality lands," said Stephen Bloch,

conservation director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, an advocacy group, in a statement. "Nonetheless, BLM is condemning these lands to a future of oil rigs and gas pipelines and almost certain disqualification from future wilderness designation."

The bureau first proposed opening up energy exploration in part of the area in the fall of 2003, after former interior secretary Gayle Norton reached an agreement with then-Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt not to declare any new wilderness areas in the state. Environmental advocates fought the leasing proposal in federal court, which ruled in 2006 that the plan violated the National Environmental Policy Act. Interior's own Board of Land Appeals also issued an administrative ruling backing the leasing prohibition.

In recent weeks, GOP presidential nominee John McCain (Ariz.) and running mate Sarah Palin (Alaska), along with other

politicians, have repeatedly called for greater domestic energy exploration -- leading chants of "Drill, baby, drill" on a daily basis. In a speech on energy policy Wednesday, Palin said the United States needs to pursue oil and gas at home rather than relying on imports.

"In a McCain administration, we will authorize and support new exploration and production of America's own oil and gas reserves, because we cannot outsource the solution to America's energy problem," Palin told an audience in Toledo.

But environmentalists questioned why the administration is pushing for the lease of ecologically sensitive areas when Utah has more acres leased for oil and gas development than are being drilled. At the end of fiscal year 2006, there were about 4.6 million acres of BLM-managed lands in Utah under lease, with just over 1 million acres in production.

The New York Times

Last-Minute Mischief

October 18, 2008

Editorial

All presidents indulge in end-of-the-term environmental rule-making, partly to tie up bureaucratic loose ends but mainly to lock in policies that their successor will be hard pressed to reverse.

President Bill Clinton's midnight regulations were mostly good, including a rule protecting 60 million acres of national forests from road-building and most commercial development. Not surprisingly, most of President Bush's proposals are not.

Exhibit A is a set of six resource management plans covering 11 million acres of federal land in Utah. They would open millions of acres to oil and gas drilling and off-road vehicles, risking priceless cultural artifacts and some of the most breathtaking open spaces in America. The plans, each more than 1,000 pages, were dumped on an unsuspecting public in the last few weeks by the Bureau of Land Management.

The bureau claims that it wasn't trying to pull a fast one and that drafts were available months ago. But the final documents are what count. The public now has only a few short weeks to register objections before the secretary of the interior makes them final.

Why the rush? The agency says it had to wrap things up before it ran out of planning money. What we are really seeing, though,

is the last gasp of the Cheney drill-now, drill-everywhere energy strategy; one last favor to the oil and gas drillers and the off-road vehicle enthusiasts before a more conservation-minded president (both Senators Barack Obama and John McCain have far better records than Mr. Bush) comes to town.

Environmentalists are also suspicious of the Interior Department's recent proposal to revoke a longstanding if rarely used regulation that gives Congress and the interior secretary emergency powers to protect public lands when commercial development seems to pose immediate environmental dangers.

Dirk Kempthorne, the interior secretary, decided that the rule was unnecessary after Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona and about 20 other members of the House Natural Resources Committee ordered him to withdraw about 1 million acres near the Grand Canyon from new uranium mining claims to give officials time to assess potential damage to the air and water.

Arguing that the committee did not have a quorum and that he had other means of guarding against damage, Mr. Kempthorne not only refused to obey the committee's order but proposed to rescind the departmental rule requiring him to obey it. The public has been given 15 days to

comment, after which Mr. Kempthorne will be free to jettison the rule.

Mr. Kempthorne is also pressing ahead with plans to scale back important protections required by the Endangered Species Act by eliminating some mandatory scientific reviews by the Fish and Wildlife Service of federal projects that could threaten imperiled animals and plants.

The new rule — which could be made final at any moment — would allow projects like roads, bridges and dams to proceed without review if the agency in charge decides they

would cause no environmental harm. The National Audubon Society and other groups have compiled an extensive list of cases in which the agencies misjudged the threat and Fish and Wildlife Service scientists had to intervene to protect the species.

Some of the administration's recent regulations have been helpful — one tightening pollution controls on small engines like lawnmowers, another tightening lead emissions. But others could cause serious and lasting damage. And there are still three nerve-racking months to go before Mr. Bush leaves office.



Editorial: Rush to cement Bush's legacy of deregulation

November 11, 2008

As the nation and the world focus on what the administration of Barack Obama would bring, President Bush is still hard at work eroding the federal government's ability to protect the environment.

Among the administration's efforts is a rule that would overturn regulations limiting emissions from power plants, and allow increased emissions from coal-fired plants near national parks, oil refineries, chemical plants and other types of industrial operations.

The fall out from all this for Vermont is that increased emissions from power plants in other parts of the country could end up damaging the environment here. In 2007, Vermont was part of a federal settlement with a Midwest power company whose plants were blamed for the acid rain that was killing trees and lakes in our state.

Other proposed executive branch actions that threaten the environment include:

Allow federal agencies to determine the impact of highways, mines and other building projects on endangered animals and plants without the independent reviews by scientists. The new rule would also eliminate considering the impact of a project's emissions on climate change and how that might affect endangered species.

Giving priority to energy development and off-road vehicle access on nearly 5 million acres in Utah with wilderness characteristics.

Rescinding a 1983 regulation that prohibits coal mines from dumping waste into streams that would allow expansion of mountain-top removal strip mining.

The Bush administration is racing against a Nov. 20 deadline, the cut off for the 60 days needed for publish rules to take effect for what are considered "economically significant" rules -- those with costs or societal benefits that exceed \$100 million a year.

All these changes area being executed through administrative rules and executive orders, which require no congressional action. As The Washington Post reports, "Once such rules take effect, they typically can be undone only through a laborious new regulatory proceeding."

The bigger picture is that the outgoing administration is busy cementing a legacy of deregulation that was emphatically repudiated at the polls last week.

The encouraging note is that the members of President-elect Obama's transition team are saying the new administration will move quickly to undue some of Bush's executive actions including expanded drilling for oil and natural gas in wilderness areas.

With 10 weeks to go until inauguration day, the late rush to enact new rules is a reminder that the Bush era of excessive deregulation has yet to come to a close.

Editorial: Undoing Bush's executive orders

Mercury News Editorial
November 10, 2008

There are many reasons to mark the calendar — 69 days and counting — until George W. Bush officially turns the Oval Office over to Barack Obama.

Among the best is Obama's opportunity to overturn some of Bush's worst executive orders. Where to begin: Stem cell research ban? Gone. **Drilling in environmentally sensitive areas of Utah? Not a chance. Guantanamo?** Close it as soon as possible.

One reason Bush became so overwhelmingly unpopular in his last term of office was his arrogant assertion of presidential authority through executive orders intended to bypass Congress. To his credit, Obama said in his campaign that if he were elected, he would have his attorney general review all of Bush's uses of executive powers with a special eye to those that "trample on liberty."

That review can't begin soon enough. At last count Bush had enacted 23 executive orders in 2008, and more than 100 in his second term of office.

Rescinding the ban on stem cell research would be a fitting first act for Obama. It would signify the sort of dramatic change in approach that Obama heralds; it would offer hope to millions of Americans who suffer from devastating diseases. And it would be welcomed by most Americans. Stem cell research has bipartisan support, including nearly 60 percent of Republicans.

Obama shouldn't wait long to stop the federal Bureau of Land Management from opening about 360,000 acres in Utah to oil and gas drilling.

The president-elect's transition chief, John Podesta, told reporters Sunday that Obama regards the acreage as too environmentally fragile to support drilling.

Closing Guantanamo will be a taller order. Obama will have to decide what to do with the terrorist suspects housed there and figure out how to deal with future detainees. But the Bush administration held prisoners at Guantanamo for more than five years without charging them and also routinely used abusive interrogation tactics such as waterboarding. Guantanamo presents the darkest blot on America's image, both at home and abroad, during Bush's presidency, and closing it will signal that human rights are again an American priority.

At least two other Bush executive orders call for immediate reversal. The first, Bush's insistence that health workers teach abstinence only as a policy for combating AIDS in the developing world, has been partially responsible for millions of deaths in Africa. It's ludicrous that health organizations that accept U.S. funding are prevented from allowing their workers to offer potentially lifesaving condoms to men and women throughout Africa.

Closer to home, Obama should also grant California the authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from automobiles. Throughout his presidency, Bush ignored and

sometimes tried to quash scientific research when it didn't support his political objectives. A blatant example last year was the administration's policy that kept California from enforcing pioneering regulations designed to tackle global warming.

American voters clearly said on Election Day that they want the new president to enact change when he takes office. Reversing Bush's worst presidential executive orders is the quickest way to begin accomplishing that goal.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Bush legacy Last-ditch rules hurt environment

Tribune Editorial
November 6, 2008

Bush administration officials are rushing to implement new rules and change old ones before they pack up and leave Washington to a new president.

The big winners are oil and gas extractors, polluting industries such as power plants, off-road-vehicle users and mines that are now restricted by regulations protecting the environment. The losers are the West's wildlife, archaeological treasures, fragile forests and deserts and all Americans who want to enjoy the quiet beauty of public lands, breathe clean air and drink clean water.

In Utah, the Bureau of Land Management has worked feverishly to get six new management plans in place that will open up millions of acres, including thousands of acres of wilderness-quality public land, to drilling and off-road-vehicle use.

The hurried-up plans, five of which were released last week, are an eleventh-hour effort of Bush's BLM to eliminate federal protections for Utah's redrock treasures and give extraction industries and motorized recreationists a virtual free hand.

The rules for the Moab, Kanab, Vernal, Richfield and Price BLM districts are final; the Monticello plan awaits state review. Adhering

to the Bush directive to overcome "obstacles to drilling," including environmental-protection laws, wildlife concerns and proximity to national parks, the plans will oversee the degradation of Utah's public lands for at least a decade. Even the Environmental Protection Agency has been critical, and the Government Accountability Office questions why the BLM is bent on selling more leases when energy companies have developed few of the leases they already have.

The BLM announced Tuesday a December sale of oil and gas leases on 360,000 acres of Utah public lands. Earlier, the agency indicated the sale would include parcels in Nine Mile Canyon, where hundreds of ancient drawings are already threatened by nearby drilling; in Desolation Canyon; and areas near Dinosaur National Monument. But the BLM refused Tuesday to give details, so it's unknown whether the sale will include more wilderness-quality land or less.

Other rules would lower standards for drinking water, allow power plants to spew millions of tons more CO₂ into the atmosphere and let oil refineries, chemical factories and other industrial plants increase harmful emissions.

These rule changes will only add to the catastrophic effects of Bush's pro-industry legacy of environmental destruction and disregard for the future of the planet.

The New York Times

U.S. to Open Public Land Near Parks for Drilling

By FELICITY BARRINGER
November 8, 2008

The Bureau of Land Management has expanded its oil and gas lease program in eastern Utah to include tens of thousands of acres on or near the boundaries of three national parks, according to revised maps published this week.

National Park Service officials say that the decision to open lands close to Arches National Park and Dinosaur National Monument and within eyeshot of Canyonlands National Park was made without the kind of consultation that had previously been routine.

The inclusion of the new lease tracts angered environmental groups, which were already critical of the bureau's original lease proposal, made public this fall, because they said it could lead to industrial activity in empty areas of the state, some prized for their sweeping vistas, like Desolation Canyon, and others for their ancient petroglyphs, like Nine Mile Canyon.

The bureau's new maps, made public on Election Day, show not just those empty areas but 40 to 45 new areas where leasing will also be allowed.

The tracts will be sold at auction on Dec. 19, the last lease sale before President Bush leaves office a month later. The new leases were added after a map of the proposed tracts was given to the National Park Service for comment this fall. The proximity of industrial activity

concerns park managers, who worry about the impact on the air, water and wildlife within the park, as well as the potential for noise, said Michael D. Snyder, a regional director of the Park Service who is based in Denver.

The Park Service is usually given one to three months to comment on leases, Mr. Snyder added.

"This is the first time," he said, "where we have not had sufficient opportunity to comment."

He said he had asked the Bureau of Land Management's state director, Selma Sierra, to pull the new tracts from the December auction for more study. She refused.

Kent Hoffman, a deputy director of the land management bureau's Utah office, said the Park Service had ample opportunity to review the broad management plan under which the leases were developed, even if it was not given the usual notice of which leases were being offered for sale. Mr. Hoffman added that 37 days remained to air any protests and review the decision about which tracts to lease.

If any leases are sold Dec. 19 and subsequently delivered to the buyers before Inauguration Day, however, it will be difficult for the new administration to reverse those decisions.

The perennial struggle over the use of public lands in the West, which traditionally pits

ranchers, miners and oil and gas interests against environmentalists and groups interested in historic preservation, has been particularly acute in Utah.

Many in the state, where resentment of the federal government runs deep, remain angry about the Clinton administration's decision in 1999 to set aside for protection three million acres deemed to have "wilderness qualities." The state sued; in 2003, the Bush administration settled and removed protections from those acres.

Before the new lands could be opened to leasing, the land management bureau had to revise its resource management plans designating which areas are appropriate for mining, drilling and motorized recreation and which should remain free of such activity. Last week, six such plans, covering the central and eastern parts of Utah, were approved. The Dec. 19 auction was expected to include energy

leases of some land previously off limits, like Desolation Canyon. But not until Tuesday did the bureau release the final maps containing the new leases near park boundaries.

Kathleen Sgamma, the government affairs director of the Independent Petroleum Association of the Mountain States, said of the new lease proposals, "If you can't develop oil and natural gas in this part of rural Utah, we might as well concede the United States has lost all interest in energy security."

But David Nimkin, the southwest regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association, said, "It's very clear that there's a time clock, and they are anxious to move these out for sale, for obvious reasons."

The leases, Mr. Nimkin said, seem to be "profoundly in conflict with the direction of the new administration and the new Congress."



Bush's parting moves on the environment

Last-minute rule changes would weaken environmental protections, critics say

By Amanda Paulson
November 5, 2008 edition

Chicago

The changes seem minor: clarifications of regulations, revisions to rules, updated land-management proposals.

But some recent proposals from the Interior Department – many likely to be finalized in the waning months of the Bush administration and pushed through with a shortened comment period – are seen by critics as an assault on America's environmental resources and an attempt to solidify industry-friendly policy.

The proposals include changes to the Endangered Species Act, new management plans for 11 million acres in Utah, an effort to revoke congressional committees' emergency powers to protect public lands, and a rule change for mountaintop mining regulations.

The Interior Department says the changes are common-sense ones that balance the needs of conservation with those of national energy policy. Environmentalists counter that the actions represent the final efforts of an administration that has been hostile to the environment since Day 1.

“Overall, it certainly is consistent with the approach this administration has taken for

the past eight years,” says Sharon Buccino, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's land program. “It's one final push before they go out the door to really open up public resources for private and industry gain.”

Mr. Bush is not the first lame-duck president to change environmental rules. Bill Clinton, in the last few days of his presidency, pushed through regulations to protect vast areas of the West.

The proposals include the following:

- A change to the Endangered Species Act to disallow the ESA from being used to regulate global climate change even if a species, like the polar bear, is suffering as a result of it. The change also reduces the number of scientific reviews of projects performed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

- Six new resource management plans for 11 million acres of federal land in Utah that critics say would open more roads and trails, make nearly 9 million acres available for oil and gas development, and reduce the areas managed primarily for environmental value. Five of the plans were finished on Friday.

- A rule change eliminating one of the few regulations governing mountaintop mining, a common practice in Appalachia in which a mountain's top is blown off to get access to the rich coal beds beneath. Currently, a largely ignored "buffer zone" rule bars mining companies from dumping debris within 100 feet of any stream. The new rule would require them to either avoid the buffer zone or show why that is not possible, and to minimize harming the streams "to the extent possible" if they must dump there.

- A proposal to remove an "emergency powers" provision that allows the Interior Department or two congressional committees to protect public lands. The rule gained prominence this summer when the House Natural Resources Committee declared 1 million acres next to the Grand Canyon off limits to uranium mining.

These proposals have been portrayed incorrectly, says Chris Paolino, a spokesman for the Interior Department.

The proposed changes to the ESA, Mr. Paolino says, would clarify the Interior secretary's belief that the ESA is not the right mechanism for regulating climate change. "Science at this point cannot make the link between the specific greenhouse-gas emissions from, say, Kansas, and link it to the effect on a subset of polar bears or an individual polar bear in the Arctic region," he says. As for the reduced number of federal scientific reviews of projects, he believes it will allow the Fish & Wildlife scientists to give more time to projects that are more likely to affect listed species.

Environmental groups counter that allowing different agencies to determine whether a project needs independent scientific review hasn't worked in the past and could lead to a scattershot approach in which potential

hazards to species are overlooked. "They won't have good sense of the cumulative impacts if they're not tracking projects across species and agencies," says Noah Greenwald, science director for the Center for Biodiversity in Tucson, Ariz.

As for the ESA's role in climate change, Mr. Greenwald argues that it provides a focus for assessing the impact of greenhouse-gas emissions. He notes that even in the past, when the ESA was used to regulate DDT because of its impact on the bald eagle, officials did not tie one use of DDT to the death of one particular eagle.

Some of the harshest criticism is reserved for the land-management proposals in Utah and the easing of restrictions on drilling and oil-shale exploration, in part because they would be difficult for a future administration to overturn.

"Defaulting to providing more and more routes for oil and gas and more land for oil and gas development effectively prohibits other uses of these lands," says Nada Culver, senior counsel for The Wilderness Society. Encouraging oil-shale development and geothermal leasing, and creating new "energy corridors" in the West, could lead to an "industrialization of the landscape," she adds.

The Bureau of Land Management, for its part, says most of the lands were already open to potential drilling and off-road vehicles. The new plans would get rid of some of the unrestricted vehicle use, they say, and put designated routes in play. "There seems to be a perception ... that these plans would throw open vast new acreage to development and use," says Don Ogaard, planning lead for Utah's BLM. "The land is open to that use now."

The Washington Post

Saving the Desert Southwest

Saturday, October 18, 2008

By Tom Kenworthy

Late last month, my wife and I took one of our semi-regular treks in the Grand Canyon, a two-day, 23-mile hike from the North Rim down to the Colorado River and back up, to the South Rim. As always, it was a test of aging knees, a massage for the soul and a total immersion in geology and natural spectacle.

Even more than usual, it was a reminder of the sometimes erratic course of our collective stewardship of the red rock country of the desert Southwest.

Today we take protection of Grand Canyon National Park for granted. But a little more than a century ago, the canyon was being overrun by speculators filing mining claims, building toll roads and establishing other commercial enterprises. In a 1903 visit, President Theodore Roosevelt signaled his intention to protect the canyon as a national monument; he achieved the designation five years later. "Leave the Grand Canyon as it is," Roosevelt said. "You cannot improve upon it. What you can do is keep it for your children, your children's children, all who come after you."

If only the Bush administration would heed that advice and apply some of Roosevelt's wisdom to the landscapes north of the canyon in Utah. But as it prepares to leave office, the administration is working quickly to hand over much of southern Utah to the

oil and gas industry and off-road-vehicle enthusiasts.

In less than two months this summer, the federal Bureau of Land Management released six new proposals for managing 11 million acres of public land in Utah. Under the plans, which will soon become final and will then govern activities on these lands for the next two decades, 80 percent of some of the Southwest's most spectacular treasures will be open to oil and gas development. Dirt-bike riders and all-terrain-vehicle drivers will have 17,000 miles of overland travel routes. Some 85 percent of roadless areas that the bureau itself acknowledges have great wilderness value will be sacrificed. A half-million acres protected as "areas of critical environmental concern" will lose that status.

Last month the Salt Lake Tribune editorialized: "The Bureau of Land Management under the Bush administration is trying to make a clean sweep of it before President Bush leaves office," favoring "all-terrain vehicles and energy development over wildlife, water, scenic beauty and archaeological treasures."

What the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance rightly calls a "legacy of destruction" is just the latest chapter of a decades-long fight to preserve this remote corner of America, a place where the Western writer Wallace Stegner said that

"much of the wilderness is unique, unmatched in any part of the world."

Some of that history came back to me as we drove south of Moab toward the canyon. At the height of the Great Depression, Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes proposed to create a 4.5-million-acre national park stretching from the outskirts of Moab all the way south to the San Juan River and west to the Escalante River.

Ickes's audacious idea died in the arms of Utah politicians who preferred grazing, mining and other development. FDR saved a piece by creating Capitol Reef National Monument, now a national park. In 1964, Congress established Canyonlands National Park, and 32 years later President Bill Clinton designated nearly 2 million more acres as Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

To some, all that protected federal ground is enough. But southern Utah is big country, full of canyons large and small, hidden gardens of plant and animal diversity,

endless rock formations that dazzle the eye, and rich archaeological reminders of ancient Pueblo culture. There's a lot more that deserves much better than what the Bush administration has in store for it.

In the midst of a presidential election campaign and a global economic meltdown, it's probably too much to ask of the public to rise up and put the brakes on. But maybe the next administration and Congress can reverse direction.

"The Utah deserts, and plateaus and canyons are not a country of big returns," Stegner wrote, "but a country of spiritual healing, incomparable for contemplation, meditation, solitude, quiet, awe, peace of mind and body."

In these troubling times, we need to preserve as much of that as we can.

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The Salt Lake Tribune

BLM plan for Moab: Agency's notion of balance shorts protection

Tribune Editorial
08/04/2008

Moab means many things to many Americans - Arches, Canyonlands, uranium, bicycles on the Slickrock Trail, four-wheeling, oil and gas wells, the Colorado River. So when the largest local landlord, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, tries to balance competing uses on 1.8 million of these extraordinary acres, it can't please everyone.

Finding that balance is what the BLM's Moab Field Office has tried to do in its new Resource Management Plan. We find that while it has made significant progress toward environmental protection, it could and should have done more.

Take off-highway vehicle use, for example. By one measure, the BLM's final proposal takes a huge stride toward protecting these fragile desert lands from being ground to dust. Compared to the current plan, created in 1985, it reduces the number of acres open to cross-country travel from 620,000 to 1,866. It would reduce the miles of designated routes from about 6,200 to about 3,700.

That *sounds* good. But even granting that the planning area is a huge chunk of real estate - it covers all of Grand County and the northern third of San Juan County - 3,700

miles is about 15 times the official highway mileage from Salt Lake City to Moab in designated OHV routes. That's a bunch too much.

Consider oil and gas leasing. The proposed plan would decrease production only slightly from the current plan, and would barely change projected state royalties and the number of wells. There would be big increases, however, in the numbers of acres on which drilling techniques which have a smaller environmental impact would be required. Sadly, given the Bush administration's drill-at-any-cost philosophy, the BLM proposal is about the best that could be hoped for.

Then there's the perennial elephant in the Utah public lands debate, wilderness. The proposal identifies three areas comprising about 48,000 acres that would be managed to protect and maintain wilderness characteristics. By comparison, a more environmentally friendly alternative the BLM considered, but rejected, included 33 areas comprising 266,000 acres. This illustrates how the BLM's view of balance clearly is not skewed toward wilderness, when, given rapid development in Utah and concern about the planet's declining health, it should be.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Open invitation: BLM Monticello plan invites destruction of relics

Tribune Editorial

09/08/2008

The Bureau of Land Management under the Bush administration is trying to make a clean sweep of it before President Bush leaves office, issuing management plans for Utah public lands that favor all-terrain vehicles and energy development over wildlife, water, scenic beauty and archaeological treasures.

Ancient Anasazi ruins in the Monticello area - 1.8 million acres in San Juan and Grand counties - would be especially hard-hit, and could even be destroyed by the BLM plan for that area.

The agency wants to swap the current designation of "areas of critical environmental concern" that now protect Cedar Mesa, Dark Canyon and Butler Wash for a new label: "special recreation-management areas." The change would invite more ATV riders, along with more hikers and cyclists, some of whom are environmentally conscious and others who behave irresponsibly, even criminally.

The BLM says it can better enforce rules prohibiting human contact with the remains of Anasazi dwellings and relics under the new designation. That's ludicrous. The BLM has one enforcement officer for the entire Monticello region. Inviting more visitors and making it easier for looters and vandals

to find the ruins, without beefing up enforcement, sounds a death knell for these archaeological treasures.

The BLM seems oblivious to the value and unique nature of these ruins. In its single-minded focus on opening up all public lands - even those that are home to irreplaceable artifacts - to motorized recreation and development, it is willing to sacrifice other values that are important to Americans.

The agency insists it can educate visitors about the fragility of the ruins while allowing them free rein to run roughshod over the area. Nonsense.

Education is vital, but it must be accompanied by strict rules to protect what cannot be replaced and some better means of enforcement than what now exists.

The proposed rules allowing people access to nearly all parts of these areas is an open invitation to looters, vandals and ATVers who only want to leave their mark or take souvenirs and care little about the land and its cultural history.

If this plan is adopted, the next Congress and president should act immediately to reverse it.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Inviting plunder: Vernal BLM plan caters too much to OHVs

Tribune Editorial
08/29/2008

Call it a partial victory for people who want to protect the wildlife, scenic beauty and cultural resources in the Uinta Basin, Uinta Mountains and the Book Cliffs around Vernal.

The Bureau of Land Management rightly responded to the protests of its proposed land-use plan for 1.7 million acres and has reduced the number it will designate for oil and gas drilling. The BLM had originally proposed prohibiting drilling on only about 65,000 acres. Now it would close about 187,000 acres to oil and gas exploration.

It would have been difficult to ignore the outcry. Comments flooded the Vernal BLM office from environmental groups and citizens who didn't want to see the area completely torn up by energy development.

The BLM's decision to limit drilling is the good news about the management plan that will decide the fate of the area for decades to come. The bad news is the accommodation made to off-highway vehicle users. While the BLM says it wants to limit OHVs to trails designated by the federal land management agency, it would also allow the "all-terrain" vehicles to veer off for 300 feet on each side of the trail.

That rule would invite plunder by off-roaders, some of whom need no invitation to take their vehicles through terrain that is too fragile for such abuse. Given the BLM's inadequate funding for enforcement, allowing OHVs that kind of latitude would simply give their drivers carte blanche to ride anywhere the four-wheelers or motorcycles can go, causing erosion, destroying plant life, harassing wildlife and contaminating creeks and streams.

Motorized vehicles not only degrade the environment, but ruin the outdoor experience for quiet recreationists - hikers, backpackers, horseback riders and mountain bikers. The BLM's mission is to manage public lands for multiple uses, not to create a playground for one group at the expense of others and the environment.

The BLM lands border the Northern Ute reservation and U.S. Forest Service wilderness areas, which contain archaeological treasures and pristine forests.

Protests to the revised plan can be sent to the BLM during the coming 30 days. To read the full report and learn how to protest, go to www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/info/newsroom/2008/august/vernal_field_office.html

The Salt Lake Tribune

No management plan: BLM makes gift of land to off-roaders, drillers

Tribune Editorial
August 11, 2008

It's an off-roader's dream: a federal management plan making nearly 2 million acres of public land a playground for off-highway vehicles.

The Bureau of Land Management's proposal for the BLM lands in six Utah counties is also a gift tied with a big red ribbon and handed to oil and gas developers.

But it can hardly be called "management," especially the type of multiple-use management and land conservation the BLM is charged to provide for the Western lands owned by all Americans. By opening up 90 percent of the area to OHV use and 80 percent to drilling, the plan effectively excludes quiet recreation - mountain biking, hiking and backpacking - and sacrifices scenic vistas, wildlife habitat, and cultural treasures including archaeological ruins, relics and rock art.

This is not multiple use, but an attempt in the waning months of the Bush administration to remove public lands protections. The BLM, in approving this management plan for the Richfield area spread over Sanpete, Sevier, Piute, Wayne, Garfield and Kane counties, has taken the side of motorized recreation and energy development in the battle for some of the last untrammelled open spaces in the state.

The BLM is saying it will not protect endangered species and wilderness-quality

areas from irresponsible OHV use that has already scarred public lands, caused erosion, disturbed the migratory habits and habitat of wildlife and dirtied creeks and streams. It will not limit the destruction of Richfield-area public lands caused by energy developers who cut roads, haul equipment and erect drill rigs on some of the most scenic places in Utah.

The plan would diverge from the BLM's own policy by allowing OHVs in areas of Factory Butte now closed by the BLM to protect two endangered plant species. The normal procedure would prevent reopening the area until the plants have rebounded, but this management proposal is anything but normal.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act requires the BLM to "sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations." This plan ignores that mandate.

The mountains, rivers and forests comprising 2 million acres will be taken over by noisy, exhaust-spewing OHVs and greedy energy developers, eliminating the possibility that their wilderness qualities could be preserved for future generations. To them, we'll be known as the idiot generation.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Too much fun: OHV overuse could harm Kane, Garfield counties

Tribune Editorial
07/22/2008

Riding off-highway vehicles is a fun, easy way to experience the outdoors. But, when it comes to OHV use on Utah's arid public lands, it's easy to have too much of a good thing.

Many OHV users don't understand their responsibility to treat public lands with respect, don't know how fragile the land is, or simply don't care.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Land Management seems to have forgotten its mandate to manage public lands for multiple uses while, at the same time, protecting its value as watershed, wildlife habitat and quiet refuge for all the Americans who own it.

It seems evident from the spiderweb pattern of OHV trails in the BLM's proposed management plan for Kane and Garfield counties that the federal agency has thrown up its hands and virtually turned over thousands of acres in the study area to OHV use. Some 1,462 miles of OHV trails were proposed in the original draft of the plan, but 1,478 are included in the BLM's preferred alternative designated in the final proposal.

That opens up huge areas within the nearly 90,000 acres found by the BLM to be of wilderness quality. Allowing motorized travel through these areas would preclude their eventually being designated wilderness or wilderness study areas and prevents cyclists,

hikers, horseback riders and backpackers from enjoying quiet recreation.

But protecting beautiful, remote areas for non-motorized recreation is only one reason to limit the number of OHV trails. Too many OHV riders don't stick to recognized trails. They find it too tempting to go "where no man has gone before," ruining riparian areas, creating erosion and destroying fragile plants and wildlife habitat.

The dust in high-traffic areas during dry months is a threat to air quality and plant life. Dust on snowpack has been found to cause early and rapid melting, which threatens reservoir water storage.

The BLM says it isn't equipped to study OHV overuse on public lands as it interacts with the effects of climate change. But, instead of taking a cautious approach pending more research, the BLM seems to have decided it will not limit OHV use until the damage has been done.

Utahns who are concerned about such a *laissez-faire* attitude can send comments about the plan by logging in to this Web site: blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/kanab/planning.html

Despite the impression given by the BLM management plans, the public lands belong to all of us, not only to OHV users.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Drill, drill, drill: BLM plan for Carbon, Emery counties goes to the gas

Tribune Editorial
09/08/2008

In Price, they take to heart the Bush administration's order to drill, drill, drill. For natural gas, that is. They like to mine coal, too.

The Price Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management has just issued its preferred resource management plan for the 2.5 million acres of public lands it oversees in Carbon and Emery counties. In language only a bureaucrat could love, the plan would “maximize mineral development in areas with the greatest potential for maximum resource recovery.”

Which would be fine if mineral development were always the highest and best use of these lands. But in some cases, it's not. This is, after all, the neighborhood that includes such scenic and archaeological wonders as Nine Mile and Desolation canyons. In its attempt to balance mineral development with environmental preservation, the BLM folks in Price have leaned far too heavily on the side of the scale that holds mineral extraction.

For example, they took another look at 937,440 acres of land that had been previously identified as having wilderness characteristics, but had not been formally designated as wilderness study areas. Of those, they set aside only about one-tenth, that is, 97,100 acres in five areas, as worthy to protect their wilderness characteristics. Even these will be subject to mineral leasing so long as no surface occupancy is involved. In other words, they will be available for extraction by slant drilling.

The rest could become ineligible for further consideration as wilderness if development criss-crosses them with roads. Under federal law, wilderness must be roadless.

The folks in the Price office considered six alternative management plans. They chose the one that would have the second-largest overall impact in terms of environmental degradation. Even maintaining the status quo would have less. Viewed in that light, it is clear that this plan would move these lands toward exploitation rather than preservation.

This vast area already is rocking beneath a natural gas drilling boom, as Utahns know from the controversy over heavy rigs churning up dust in Nine Mile Canyon, whose petroglyphs have been described as the longest art gallery in the world.

This plan would open more lands to similar treatment. So long as there is gas to drill, the BLM is saying, that's what matters most.

It is clear that this plan would move these lands toward exploitation rather than preservation.