

Hold on Judge puts brakes on land plans

To paraphrase an old adage, "Act in haste, repent at your leisure."

The Bureau of Land Management under former President George Bush acted quickly to sell drilling leases on some of Utah's most scenic and culturally precious lands before the administration left office Tuesday. In its haste to make a gift of the leases to extraction companies, the agency even ignored a warning from the Environmental Protection Agency.

But a court appears about to force the BLM to repent of its blatant disregard for its mission to protect Americans' special and irreplaceable lands.

A U.S. District Court judge just days before Bush's departure acted prudently to halt the controversial sale of leases on 77 parcels near Arches and Canyonlands national parks, at Desolation Canyon, Dinosaur National Monument, the ancient art "gallery" of Nine Mile Canyon and other wilderness-quality lands. U.S. District Court Judge Ricardo Urbina issued a temporary restraining order to block the sale until he rules on a lawsuit brought by conservation groups arguing that drilling in the disputed lands would do permanent environmental damage, fouling the air and scenic vistas and destroying the rock art.

The unusual weekend ruling, coming just days before President Barack Obama took the oath of office, will probably keep these parcels off the auction block for the foreseeable future and could have even more widespread consequences.

In granting the restraining order, Urbina stated that the BLM had failed to properly consider how drilling could affect air quality on more than 103,000 acres of sensitive public lands.

The EPA had advised the BLM to analyze the potential impacts of oil and gas drilling on the 77 parcels in order to meet federal clean-air laws. But the BLM didn't have time for that. Its mandate from the Bush administration was to open as many acres of the West as possible to drilling before Jan. 20.

But now the BLM regional management plans released last year covering nearly all the public lands the agency manages in Utah are in question. The processes and analyses

used to designate the disputed parcels are the same as those used to designate all-terrain-vehicle routes and areas for drilling in all six plans.

If Urbina ultimately rules this BLM lease sale illegal, the management plans may be next. The Obama administration could then redo the plans to better protect Utah's public lands