

## **New day for drilling More study before lands are leased**

Tribune Editorial

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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has promised to bring a "balanced approach" to permitting more drilling for oil and natural gas in America's Western states. That will be a welcome change, and not only for people concerned about protecting fragile arid lands, wildlife, water and air quality, but for energy development companies.

Under former President George W. Bush's "drill at all costs" policy, lands near national parks and in wilderness-quality areas that never should have been leased to development companies appeared on the auction block. Environmental groups and others rightly went to court to prevent drilling on those parcels. Oil and gas developers had to wait months or years to learn the outcome, and the uncertainty was not good for business.

Salazar said that about 40 percent of oil and gas leases on public lands were protested in 2008, a huge increase from the 1 percent targeted in 1998. He correctly blamed the increase on the Bush administration's policies that allowed leases "in places where they should not have been or without enough agency scrutiny or public participation."

But under policy changes Salazar announced Wednesday, federal agencies will take a closer look at all possible uses of public lands and listen to the public's environmental concerns long before deciding to sell leases on any parcels. That's how the system should work, but did not under President Bush.

Salazar justly criticized the Bush administration for its "headlong rush" to lease Western lands "anywhere and everywhere." He was particularly critical of the lease sale of lands near Utah's Nine Mile Canyon, national parks and monuments in the final month of 2008, as Bush's industry-friendly appointees were leaving Washington.

The former Democratic senator from Colorado, shortly after taking over at Interior, suspended 60 of the 77 leases hurriedly approved in Utah without proper public input or environmental assessment. A federal court also declared the sale illegal. Salazar later placed eight of the leases off-limits to drilling; 52 are being re-evaluated.

According to the secretary, it's a new day in the West. He will be restoring common sense to permitting energy development while protecting endangered species, watersheds and scenic recreational lands that are important to Western states' economies. We urge Salazar to also take a

close look at further restricting all-terrain-vehicle use on public lands.

That new day has arrived none too soon. The damage already done by unfettered drilling and ATV use is appalling. It must stop.