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Undoing damage

Salazar right to cancel lease sale

Tribune Editorial

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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's decision to cancel the sale of oil and gas leases on 77 parcels of land -- redrock vistas with real and symbolic value for Utah's image and its tourism industry -- is a clear victory for the state. A timely one, too, owing to the hasty efforts of the departing Bush administration to open up millions of acres of public land in Utah to oil and gas drilling.

Still, the significance of Salazar's decision hinges on whether it proves, as it should, to be the opening salvo in a determined battle to restore balance to the federal government's management of public lands in Utah and elsewhere. Salazar, who left the U.S. Senate to serve in the new Obama administration, correctly characterized the parcels as "the doorstep of national treasures in Utah." They comprise about 103,000 acres near Arches and Canyonlands national parks, Desolation Canyon, Dinosaur National Monument, wilderness study areas and Nine Mile Canyon.

The parcels were included in a sale of oil and gas leases held by the Bureau of Land Management in December. The sale was disrupted when monkey-wrencher Tim DeChristopher, a University of Utah student, successfully bid on a number of the leases he had no intention of buying. Ruling in a lawsuit filed against the sale, a federal judge ordered the leases put on hold until after Obama's inauguration.

Salazar rightly noted that the parcels included in the BLM lease sale had not received proper environmental review based on sound science. After so long, what a remarkably fresh idea: Decisions relating to land, water, wildlife and the delicate balance between commercial use and preservation should be based on *science*.

For years, Bush administration officials have been hell-bent on handing out drilling rights to energy companies with little regard for the long-term consequences of ravaging the natural landscapes of the West for short-term gain.

Although Salazar said the Utah parcels may not be off the auction block permanently, it's unlikely that leases on the sensitive parcels will be sold. The ongoing lawsuit must be resolved before leases can be issued, a process that can take years.

In the meantime, we urge Salazar to take a hard look at the hastily written BLM resource-management plans that spawned the lease sale. Three of the six plans for Utah are being challenged in court on grounds they were -- surprise -- weighted in favor of drilling and off-highway vehicles, and did not properly address wilderness, climate change, OHV-related damage, archeological sites, and other land and wildlife considerations.

A good first step, Mr. Salazar.

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