

Drilling decisions Report shows flawed BLM process

Tribune Editorial

Updated:06/12/2009 09:01:57 PM MDT

It's no surprise. The Interior Department found serious flaws in the process that auctioned more than 100,000 acres of public land near national parks and monuments in Utah for oil and gas drilling.

A federal judge came to the same conclusion in January and issued a restraining order to block the sale. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar followed up by putting a hold on all the leases until his department could review the Bureau of Land Management's questionable action.

Both decisions throw into doubt the BLM management plans that allow drilling and all-terrain-vehicle use on a majority of public lands. They were drawn up and released in the final months of the Bush administration without proper public input. Those plans should be reviewed and, where possible, changed to protect public lands from overuse.

The National Park Service objected to 77 parcels included in the December sale, saying drilling would threaten scenic vistas, recreation, archaeological treasures and air quality in Canyonlands and Arches national parks, Dinosaur National Monument and Nine Mile Canyon. The BLM released a list of parcels for the auction, but then added 162 parcels to the original 79 without consulting the NPS about potential impact on Utah's national parks and monuments.

The sale also included lands the BLM itself had earlier designated as having wilderness qualities.

A report issued by Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes, whose nomination to the department post was delayed by Utah Sen. Bob Bennett, says the agency, in its rush to expand drilling in the West before former President Bush left office, bypassed the BLM's accepted practices. Salazar promised to expedite the report in order to convince Bennett to lift his block of Hayes' nomination. But it's clear the Interior secretary considered Bennett's ploy simple political theater, which it was. The senator's blustering had no effect on the outcome.

However, the report is no slam-dunk for environmentalists. Salazar says some of the parcels that were auctioned in the December sale could still be leased to developers. But he promises future decisions will be based on thorough environmental reviews and consultation with the Forest Service and other federal agencies.

The impact of climate change and a move toward renewable energy sources also will be considered.

That's the way the process should work, a stark contrast to the drill-everywhere approach of Salazar's predecessors.