

Report on oil, gas leases shows flaws that must be fixed

By Heidi McIntosh

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Last December, the Bureau of Land Management auctioned off for drilling some of America's most spectacular wilderness landscapes.

Remote country dominated by towering cliffs and serpentine slickrock canyons right on the doorstep of Canyonlands and Arches national parks and Dinosaur National Monument, popular recreation areas bordering the famous Monitor and Merrimac buttes north of Moab and lands that the BLM itself found to have wilderness value -- all were going to be handed over to oil companies who are already sitting idly on nearly 4 million acres of leased public lands.

Fortunately, a federal court judge enjoined the leases before the BLM could seal the deal with bidders.

On June 11 the Department of Interior released a report confirming that BLM badly mishandled the leases. According to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar: "It is clear that in the rush to sell the leases, the previous administration bypassed normal reviews and consultations with the National Park Service. . . . many of the 77 parcels that were auctioned off are close to national park units and even closer to other sensitive, world-class landscapes including Desolation Canyon and Nine Mile Canyon."

The report heaped criticism not only on the leases but also on the flawed land use plans that authorized them. BLM issued these plans late in 2008 in an attempt to seal Utah's destiny as another Western oil patch for the next 20 years. The plans, which open 80 percent of BLM lands to oil and gas development, would replace scenic wilderness landscapes and national park borderlands with oil fields, sludge pits, pipelines and droning generators.

Relying on a backroom deal between Utah and former Interior chief Gale Norton in which Norton gave away her longstanding authority to designate new "wilderness study areas" for protection, the BLM gave short shrift to the remarkable and unique wilderness lands it found in the planning process.

Overall, only 16 percent of those lands got any level of protection, and places like Labyrinth Canyon, Valley of the Gods, Sweetwater Reef, Muddy Creek and the

Vermilion Cliffs were left to oil and gas drilling and off-road vehicle use.

BLM's plans also designated an excessive 20,000 miles of off-road vehicle trails which invite ORVs to tear up the land, resulting in soil erosion, fragmented wildlife habitat, polluted water, fire-fueling weeds, dust storms and easy backcountry access to those who would loot archaeological sites. This vast network of trails also puts streams, water resources and native plant and animal life under additional stress when they are already stretched to the limits by drought and climate change.

These land use plans unnecessarily threaten America's wilderness and cultural heritage -- "unnecessarily" because BLM can protect all of the remaining wilderness quality lands it manages in Utah and still allow 86 percent of the proposed oil and gas wells to be drilled and 82 percent of the ORV trails. It's hard to argue that this is unfair to off-roaders or oilmen.

Fortunately, these abysmal plans can be fixed and balance can be restored. Wild lands that shelter archaeological sites, offer a sanctuary where families can enjoy peace, quiet and adventure together, and which increase ecological resilience in the face of climate change, should be protected.

It is now up to Salazar to renew and energize the Interior Department's commitment to wilderness designation, and to safeguard some of America's most magnificent and cherished places. One way to achieve this is by directing BLM to rewrite these plans so they strike a better balance between preserving Utah's distinctly unique wild lands and providing for energy development and motorized recreation only where appropriate and sustainable.

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