



6. OIL AND GAS: BLM pulls parcels from Colo. lease sale (11/05/2009)

Eryn Gable, special to E&E

The Bureau of Land Management has pulled thousands of acres of Colorado public lands from its planned oil and gas lease sale next week, including acreage near the McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area, habitat for Colorado River cutthroat trout and what would have been the first geothermal parcel offered by the agency in Colorado.

BLM spokeswoman Erin Curtis said the agency decided to defer leasing on 7,750 acres near McInnis Canyons until the agency completes its resource management plan for the area, which is expected in 2011. The parcels include lands near a scenic byway and in wintering habitat for pronghorns.

Under the legislation that created McInnis Canyons, the conservation area cannot be leased for oil and gas development. But the legislation did not allow for a "buffer zone" outside the protected boundary, and some nearby areas have drawn interest from oil and gas developers.

Therefore, BLM opted to proceed with leasing 800 acres in two parcels near McInnis Canyons. "We did a rigorous investigation of the resources and values of the parcels and determined that those parcels were OK for us to move forward with," Curtis said.

That decision did not sit well with some environmentalists, however.

Frank Smith of the Western Colorado Congress said his group questions whether the natural gas resource in the area justifies the potential harm that drilling would cause to the canyon area's natural and cultural resources. The group did not, however, file a formal protest to the lease.

"We should be proceeding cautiously with this, especially when we currently have an oversupply in the market for natural gas," Smith said.

Luke Schafer, northwest organizer for the Colorado Environmental Coalition, also expressed concern about possible effects from oil and gas development in the area, although like the Western Colorado Congress, CEC did not formally protest the inclusion of the parcels.

"I'm hoping BLM will take it upon itself to defer the parcels without us having to file a protest," Schafer said.



The Bureau of Land Management will defer leasing of 7,750 acres near Colorado's McInnis Canyons Conservation Area until the agency completes a resource management plan for the area. But the agency will proceed with leasing 800 acres in two parcels near the canyon. Photo courtesy of BLM.

Cutthroat trout impacts

The coalition, represented by Western Resource Advocates, did file a [protest](#) on one parcel in the lease sale that includes habitat for Colorado River cutthroat trout. The parcel was also the subject of a [protest](#) by Colorado Trout Unlimited.

The groups asked BLM to defer leasing the parcel until its Little Snake field office revises its resource management plan. The revision is expected to significantly toughen restrictions on development in riparian areas.

BLM spokesman Jim Sample said the agency has agreed to defer the parcel until the RMP revision is finalized. "We're going to wait until that process is complete before offering it," he said.

The decision was welcomed by environmental groups.

"We are glad that the BLM made the right decision here and I think that this decision indicates that the BLM will be taking a more measured, thoughtful approach to leasing in the future, especially in sensitive fish and wildlife habitats," Corey Fisher, energy field coordinator for Trout Unlimited, wrote in an e-mail.

The agency also decided to defer leasing the geothermal energy parcel until its next lease sale in February, Sample said. He

said the delay would give the agency more time to meet with state officials and other stakeholders about how geothermal leases should be handled.

"Since this is the first one, it will probably set a precedent," Sample said.

BLM received two other protests concerning the Nov. 12 lease sale, including one from the Center for Native Ecosystems that included all the parcels in the sale.

The center's [protest](#) cited concerns about effects to greater sage grouse, Colorado River cutthroat trout, lynx, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, swift foxes, bald eagles, white-tailed and black-tailed prairie dogs, and greater prairie chickens, as well as rare plant species such as the Dudley Bluffs twin pod, Dudley Bluffs bladderpod and Piceance twinpod.

Sample said BLM has not decided whether it will defer any other parcels planned for the sale.

[Click here](#) for the protest by Western Resource Advocates.

[Click here](#) for the protest by Trout Unlimited.

[Click here](#) for the Center for Native Ecosystems' protest and [here](#) for a map of the Dudley Bluffs parcels.

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