

County seeks delay of leases for oil, gas exploration

Agency to auction off oil, gas on private land

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Updated: 06/10/2009 11:07:51 AM PDT
Just delay, baby, delay.

That was the message from Monterey County supervisors to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management over the pending auction of oil and gas exploration leases on about 35,000 acres in South County.

The proposed lease sale, which is part of a 2007 management plan for BLM holdings on the Central Coast and in the Southern Diablo Mountain Range, is scheduled for June 23 in Sacramento.

County supervisors voted unanimously Monday to ask the federal agency to hold off the lease sale for at least three months to give county planners time to weigh the possible impacts.

Most of the proposed oil and gas leases are on private land for which the federal government owns the mineral rights. County planners said they only became aware of this month's scheduled lease sale on June 1.

A three-month delay would allow "property owners, responsible agencies and other concerned parties time to understand and properly respond to the proposed lease sales," supervisors said in a letter sent to Jim Abbott, acting state director for the BLM.

A BLM spokeswoman said Tuesday that Abbott has the authority to delay the sale and would weigh

Monterey County's request very carefully.

County planner John Ford said leases on private lands "raise some interesting questions we haven't had a chance to look into."

Several groups, including the Ventana Wilderness Land Trust, Center for Biodiversity and Las Padres National Forest Association, joined the county in seeking to delay the lease sale. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, also has asked for the delay, said county Assistant Planning Director Carl Holm.

This would be the first BLM oil and gas lease sale in at least a decade in Monterey County. And past ones have usually been for leases on publicly owned lands, Holm said.

The 2007 BLM plan covers 274,000 acres of public land and another 444,000 acres of mineral-rights land in 11 counties, including Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties. The agency's planning process began in 2004.

The proposed lease parcels in Monterey County fall in three main clusters, located south and southeast of King City and northeast of Lake San Antonio.

The BLM plan said concerns were expressed during the planning process about impacts on habitat areas from energy development and livestock grazing.

The plan says oil and gas exploration activities would have to minimize impacts on biological resources and take "reasonable measures" to protect resources. "Reasonable measures" could include moving drilling rigs up to 200 meters to reduce impacts.

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Proposed oil and gas leases The U.S. Bureau of Land Management plans to sell leases for oil and gas exploration on thousands of acres of land in the southern part of Monterey County on June 23. County supervisors this week asked the federal agency to delay the sale until county planners can weigh the possible impacts.