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Lewisville Lake excluded from newest gas drilling auction

By Jeff Mosier

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Gas drillers are steering clear of Lewisville Lake after an uproar this spring over fracking plans.

The Bureau of Land Management released its latest list of properties available to lease for gas drilling. Lewisville Lake isn't among the bunch that are potentially headed for the auction block next spring.

Properties are nominated for auction by gas drillers hoping to bid on leasing rights. But no one nominated Lewisville Lake this time. The last effort was opposed by environmental groups and several cities, including Dallas, which gets some of its drinking water from Lewisville Lake.

That opposition was focused on concerns about possible water contamination and about what effects fracking might have on the lake's high-risk dam. The federal government is expediting plans for \$100 million to \$200 million worth of improvements to the dam.



Rose Baca/The Dallas Morning News / Workers repair the 160-foot "slide" or hole in the side of Lewisville Lake dam in April 2016

Officials with the Army Corps of Engineers indicated concerns elsewhere when they expanded the agency's ban on gas drilling near the Joe Pool Lake dam as a precaution. There have also been similar concerns in Canada.

Some in the oil and gas industry have pointed out that there has been extensive drilling near Lewisville Lake without any negative consequences.

Although Lewisville Lake is currently off the table, there is other public land in Texas and Oklahoma that were nominated for drilling leases.

Wendy Park, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity in Oakland, Calif., said she'd rather have the federal government end the lease program.

“These are lands that belong to all of us and should not be put up for sale given these grave risk to drinking water and these public lands,” said Park, who brought the Lewisville Lake auction to the attention of people here.

Her group and others also oppose drilling on federal land as part of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global warming.

Despite the opposition, it was a technicality that forced the removal of the Lewisville Lake land from the April auction. It was belatedly discovered that the 259 acres fell inside the city limits of Highland Village, Corinth and Hickory Creek. Approvals from those cities would have been required to go forward.

By then, it was too late to get approval. And approval wouldn't have been forthcoming since Highland Village was the first city to official protest the auction.

1471363493-Lewisville-Lake-(Nominated-parcels-April-2016).jpg

Donna Hummel, a spokeswoman in the BLM's New Mexico State Office, said at the time that the agency didn't know the land fell inside city limits. Some opponents, including another oil company, notified the agency.

The Lewisville Texan Journal reported earlier that the Army Corps of Engineers had notified the BLM that the property fell within the limits of the three cities.

The Army Corps of Engineers operates Lewisville Lake. But the Bureau of Land Management is responsible for mineral rights on federal property.

Lewisville Lake wasn't the only land pulled from the April auction. More than 31,000 acres controlled by the U.S. Forest Service was removed to look at environmental concerns raised by the public.

The BLM eventually withdrew all Texas property from the auction to give officials more time to evaluate the hundreds of comments. Some of those properties are again available for auction. Those include Choke Canyon Reservoir between San Antonio and Corpus Christi and Somerville Lake, east of Austin.

At the end of the 2015 fiscal year, there were 32.1 million acres of public land leased for oil and gas drilling, according to the BLM. The agency noted that's an area the size of Alabama.