

Trump condemned over plans to allow drilling near national parks

President's 'energy first' agenda means vast tracts of public land up for sale – without proper consultation, critics say

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Democrats and conservatives alike are decrying moves by the [Trump administration](#) to permit oil and gas drilling near national parks and in wildlife migration corridors, and charge that the public is not being adequately consulted.

Officials from the US interior department are pursuing an “energy first” agenda, and some 2.9m acres are up for lease auction, including many parcels close to recreation areas such as Petrified Forest national park in Arizona, Chaco Culture national historical park in New Mexico, and Dinosaur national monument in Colorado.

An auction this week in Utah sold leases within 10 miles of Canyonlands national park, in addition to tracts near Glen Canyon national recreation area. Utah, which has been a hotbed of public lands debate since Trump shrank the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments, holds quarterly lease auctions. This quarter alone saw 200,000 acres up for auction, and stakeholders expect next quarter’s auction to be of a much greater scale.

Ashley Soltysiak, director of the Utah Sierra Club, said rule changes under interior secretary Ryan Zinke mean that auctions “can now be done with little regard for public input, despite the fact that public land is being leased. The new oil and gas lease process dramatically reduces opportunities for public comment and shrinks the period for public protest to less than two weeks.”

These concerns are echoed in Colorado, where Senator Michael Bennet and Governor John Hickenlooper, both Democrats, sent letters to state leasing officials advocating for fair processes that involve citizens in the future of their public lands, before pending December oil and gas lease sales.

“Our chief concern is the lack of public participation in the new leasing process,” Governor Hickenlooper noted in his letter. “We continue to ask for the deferral of those parcels in sensitive areas, particularly those protecting wildlife corridors, where the public has been heavily engaged in pending land use plans, and where there is significant local opposition to the leases being offered in the first place.”

Bureau of Land Management officials emphasize that they welcome public participation. “Lands offered for leasing undergo thorough environmental review with opportunities for

public input at several stages,” said Ryan Sutherland, public affairs specialist for BLM Utah. He also noted that leases include stipulations for environmental protections.

Even in non-protected areas, conservationists point to concerns about wildlife impacts by fragmenting the landscape with fracking and drilling – as in Wyoming, where 1.5m acres are offered for lease through 2018, including large swaths near the famous Wind River mountain range and in the Green River upper basin.

According to a new analysis by the Center for Biological Diversity, 1.2m of those acres fall on winter habitat and migration corridors for mule deer and pronghorn. This is in apparent conflict with Zinke’s pledge in a February secretarial order to “improve habitat quality and western big game winter range and migration corridors for antelope, elk, and mule deer”.

Not all lands up for lease sale are actually sold. In Utah, only 133,921 acres sold this week out of 204,205 up for lease, and 345,085 out of 364,387 in Wyoming. And a mere 791,000 acres sold out of 11.9m up for lease sale in 2017.

The group Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship has also criticized the Trump-era leases. It “makes no sense to lock up these important public resources, which rightfully belong to all of us, for an oil and gas industry that has shown no interest in them,” said its president, David Jenkins.

Under the Obama administration in 2016, for comparison, 921,240 acres were leased out of 1.9m acres offered.