



Agency:

## Nevada mountain range unfit for oil, gas drilling

By SCOTT SONNER  
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SPARKS, Nev. (AP) — The U.S. Forest Service concluded Thursday oil and gas leasing isn't suitable in a northeast Nevada mountain range popular with hunters, fishermen and conservationists who declared the decision a major victory in their fight against the Trump administration's push for more energy exploration across the West.

Environmentalists had filed suit to block the drilling in the Ruby Mountains and Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., introduced a bill last month to permanently ban oil and gas leasing across 700 square miles (1,813 sq. kilometers) of the range in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Forest Service supervisor Bill Dunkelberger said the agency's analysis of the proposed drilling concluded there is little to no potential of oil and gas resources there, but grave concerns about potential impacts to wildlife, recreation and scenic values in that part of Elko County.

Dunkleberger said in backing the "No Leasing Alternative" that any economic benefits from the drilling proposed across about 82 square miles (212 sq. kilometers) would be limited in comparison to economic

contributions primarily from tourism, recreation and livestock grazing provided by the natural resources in the Ruby Mountains about 370 miles (595 kilometers) northeast of Las Vegas.

"Any monetary losses from the No Leasing Alternative are strongly outweighed by benefits presently provided," he wrote in the draft decision notice triggering a 45-day public comment period for formal objections.

The Forest Service began the leasing analysis in 2017 after the U.S. Bureau of Land Management said there was interest in oil and gas leasing in the area, home to mule deer, sage grouse and numerous trout species.

Bureau officials argued there would be no disturbance to the surface of the forest under a plan to drill into the ground horizontally from neighboring BLM lands, most likely through hydraulic fracturing known as fracking. Horizontal well bores bend outward for thousands of feet to reach multiple pockets of oil or gas.

"This is a resounding victory for the Rubies and the wildlife that call them home," said Patrick Donnelly, Nevada director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's a testament to the power of the people to resist the Trump administration's destructive frack-anywhere agenda."

Pam Harrington, Nevada field coordinator for Trout Unlimited, said Nevada sportsmen understand the need to develop resources.

“But this is not the place for extraction. The most valuable resource in the Rubies is the hunting, fishing and recreational value,” she said.

Andy Maggi, executive director of the Nevada Conservation League, said it’s important to continue to push Cortez Masto’s legislation in Congress to permanently prohibit oil and gas drilling in the Ruby Mountains.

“Nevadans have made it abundantly clear ... that we don’t want to see this special place disturbed,” Maggi said.