

Forest Service spikes plans for oil and gas drilling in Nevada's Ruby Mountains

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Nevada's picturesque Ruby Mountains will remain free from oil and gas exploration – at least for now.

On Thursday, the U.S. Forest Service announced it would reject a proposal that would have offered about 53,000 acres for leasing in the range that's been called "the Swiss Alps of Nevada."

The decision followed an outpouring of opposition to possible exploration from across Nevada. The proposal generated thousands of letters of opposition from Reno, Carson City, Las Vegas and rural communities in Elko County where most of the range is located.

"Somebody obviously sees this place as an important piece of Nevada as we do. That's good," said Fermina Stevens, a member of the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone who traveled from her Elko-area home around the state to speak out against the leasing proposal.

While Stevens said she was happy the Forest Service decided against offering leases, she thinks fossil fuel exploration and large scale mining still pose a threat to Nevada's natural resources.

"I can only hope this is a starting point to be able to protect more areas of Nevada," Stevens said. "Oil and gas leasing, fracking and gold mining aren't going anywhere."

One of just a handful of letters of support against thousands in opposition came from the Elko County Commission. But even support from the commission was tempered by a desire to avoid surface disturbances.

"If we did find oil we would have to come in horizontally," Commissioner Rex Steninger said in January. "We would never support any surface disturbances in the Rubies."

In denying the leases, the Forest Service cited opposition from the public.

"Receiving so many comments shows how engaged the public is with this project," said Forest Supervisor Bill Dunkelberger. "Their involvement is critical in getting a firm understanding of what concerns our communities have, what they value, and how our work and decisions can best serve their needs."

Although the Forest Service chose the no lease alternative from the environmental review, there is still a 45-day objection period.

The lease request covered 52,500 acres. It was the result of an expression of interest in oil and gas leases from a requester identified in documents as Ethan Murray, who did not respond to multiple phone calls and emails seeking an interview.

The land at the northern end is just west of Lamoille Canyon, an area known for scenic, glaciated terrain that sees an estimated 23,000 visitors annually who mostly arrive via Lamoille Canyon Road, a National Scenic Byway.

Further south the proposal sought leases on both sides of Harrison Pass Road, a seasonal route that cuts through the heart of the range and offers views of the Ruby Valley and access to the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. It also calls for leases on land that includes creeks that provide habitat for the threatened Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, hunt units for the largest deer herd in Nevada and habitat for Greater Sage Grouse.

Although most experts agree there is little chance the land under consideration would yield any fossil fuels, the mere prospect of leasing was enough to cause concern among people who enjoy recreation in the range.

Patrick Donnelly, Nevada director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said there was a threat that people could buy the leases and cause ecological damage during the exploration process in the form of roads and test wells.

“Even one test well would impact the wildlife there, because it is so pristine,” Donnelly said.

Donnelly also said it was significant that Nevadans from rural, urban and tribal communities came together in opposition.

He said it showed the desire to preserve environmentally and culturally important landscapes transcends political divides in the state.

“That is a huge symbolic victory, people don’t want fracking everywhere,” Donnelly said.

The proposal also caught the attention of Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev.

In a move that is unusual for a U.S. senator, Cortez Masto wrote a letter of opposition during the comment period for the proposal.

She also introduced a bill that would prohibit future oil and gas leasing throughout the entirety of the 425,000-acre Ruby Mountains Ranger District.

Cortez Masto praised the decision to deny the lease request and said she planned to continue pushing the bill to prevent future exploration in the range.

“I’m glad the Federal government listened to the voices of more than 14,000 Nevadans who asked for these precious public lands to be off-limits to oil and gas drilling,” she said in a written statement. “I will continue to fight in the Senate for the passage of my Ruby Mountains Protection Act, which would write into law that oil and gas leasing in the Rubies is prohibited and specifically ensure the protection of those beautiful public lands for generations to come.”