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PUBLIC LANDS

BLM proposes oil and gas development across central Calif.

Scott Streater, E&E News reporter

The Bureau of Land Management is advancing a proposal to authorize oil and natural gas leasing and development on federal lands across central California.

BLM released a final **environmental impact statement** (EIS) and proposed resource management plan today that includes a "preferred alternative" to open 683,000 acres of subsurface federal mineral estate for leasing.

If approved, it could lead to the first BLM lease sale in California since the first of two federal court orders blocked federal leasing activity in 2013. In legal settlements, BLM agreed to reevaluate the impacts of drilling from the Central Coast and Bakersfield field offices.

Today's final EIS is part of the effort to complete the settlement terms and comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. So, too, is a separate draft supplemental EIS released last month that proposes opening more than 1 million acres in eight counties to new drilling (*Energywire*, April 26).

The final EIS released today analyzed six alternatives for managing oil and gas leasing in the 11 counties managed by the Central Coast Field Office. BLM chose the option opening all available federal subsurface minerals "based on the Administration's goal of strengthening energy independence and the BLM support of an all-of-the-above energy plan that includes oil and gas underlying America's public lands," the final EIS says.

The option includes "controlled surface use" stipulations designed to protect natural resources while drilling. An additional 42,400 acres of minerals would include no-surface-occupancy requirements, including areas within the 8,000-acre Joaquin Rocks area of critical environmental concern (ACEC) and the Ciervo-Panoche Natural Area.

The option also removes from leasing and development about 67,500 acres of federal minerals underneath congressionally designated wilderness areas or wilderness study areas, as well as the Fort Ord National Monument and the 31,000-acre Clear Creek Serpentine ACEC.

"We have to comply with all applicable state regulations, and the operators do too. So there are a lot of protections in place," Ben Blom, BLM's Central Coast field manager, said in an interview.

But the proposal has raised the ire of some environmental groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, which was involved in the original litigation challenging drilling in the state.

"Trump's new plan aims to stab oil derricks and fracking rigs into some of California's most beautiful landscapes," Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

Lakewood said the final EIS proposes increasing the mineral area that's open for development by 327,000 acres over an earlier draft proposal prepared by BLM during the Obama administration.

"In California and across the country, the Trump administration is putting our communities and our climate at risk as they prioritize fossil fuel industry profits over the health and safety of our families," Monica Embrey, a

Sierra Club senior campaign representative, said in a statement. "We will use every tool at our disposal to push back against this reckless proposal and protect our public lands from fracking."

The final EIS and RMP amendment will be formally published in tomorrow's *Federal Register*, kicking off a 30-day administrative protest period running through June 10, as well as a 60-day governor's consistency review period.

A BLM spokeswoman said a record of decision authorizing the leasing plan could be issued as early as July.

BLM estimates in the final EIS that up to 37 new oil and gas wells will be drilled in the study area in the next 20 years.

"Most of those wells would be located in areas near existing development, within 5 miles of existing active wells," Blom said.

BLM will also use the analysis in the final EIS to determine whether to approve two oil and gas leases and an additional 12 "prospective leases" within the boundaries of the field office that do not contain no-surface-occupancy requirements, as required in a legal settlement. The 14 leases had been challenged in court in 2011 and 2012.

[Click here](#) to access additional documents related to the final EIS and proposed RMP amendment.