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Sound judgment: BLM must follow law on selling drilling leases

The Bureau of Land Management ignored its own research and new information about wilderness-quality lands when it sold 16 leases for oil and gas development on some of Utah's most spectacular public lands.

In short, U.S. District Judge Dale Kimball ruled emphatically this week, the BLM acted illegally. He rightly remanded the leases and reversed the BLM's decision, ordering the agency to fully comply with federal environmental laws that protect places valued for their archaeology, naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

The judge's decision will immediately stop energy companies from bulldozing roads and erecting noisy and unsightly rigs where such things would destroy the natural beauty of the 16 parcels addressed in the lawsuit. But the decision should have more far-reaching consequences.

The unequivocal and uncompromising tone of the 32-page ruling should put the brakes on the BLM's headlong rush to allow drilling on Americans' public lands with little regard for the threat, not only to the pristine nature of the land but also to invaluable watersheds and the industries of tourism, hunting, fishing and non-motorized recreation.

The ruling clearly states that the BLM, even under pressure from the environmentally obtuse Bush administration and the energy industry, cannot sidestep provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act by relying on outdated land-use plans and ignoring its own studies that identify certain lands as deserving further study as wilderness.

The 16 leases were among the first sold after a questionable 2003 settlement struck by former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt and then-Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton that froze Utah's wilderness study areas at the existing 3.2 million acres. The leases paved the way for drilling in such areas as the Book Cliffs and Desolation Canyon, lands clearly identified as having wilderness characteristics before the 2003 Norton-Leavitt pact.

We welcome this landmark ruling. It forces the BLM to properly consider all available data on the effects of drilling on sensitive lands. More important, it requires the agency to answer not only to the court, but to the American public, which owns and is immeasurably enriched by these natural treasures.