

August 13, 2006
Salt Lake Tribune Editorial

A closed door: Memo reveals BLM, energy companies too cozy

It may come as a surprise to some Bureau of Land Management officials, but they do not work for the oil and gas industries - at least not officially.

A lobbyist for several county governments in Utah wrote in a memo not intended to be read by the public that acting Utah BLM Director Henry Bisson and national BLM Deputy Director Jim Hughes are "on the same page" with energy companies and county and state officials who want to expedite - and even sidestep - legal processes to grant leases for gas and oil drilling.

The memo describes a complicity that is at least improper and at worst illegal among public officials and oil and gas companies to exclude environmental advocates and the citizenry at large from decisions about which public lands should be opened to drilling.

Lobbyist Robert Weidner's memo described a meeting of BLM, county and state officials and representatives of 10 oil and gas companies. In it he gleefully reported that Bisson is willing to "fix" Resource Management Plans to promote drilling and reduce restrictions on access to public lands.

He further described Bisson's plan to "pre-empt" the efforts of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and "other critics of resource development" to hold the BLM accountable for environmental assessments required by law.

If true, Weidner's report of the substance of this questionable meeting inspires outrage. The willingness it imputes to the BLM to circumvent federal environmental law in the cause of energy extraction was ruled illegal by a federal court judge who last week remanded 16 oil and gas leases sold in 2003.

Judge Dale Kimball ruled that the BLM had ignored its own assessment of wilderness-quality lands and refused to consider new information presented by SUWA and other groups before selling leases on sensitive public land.

The Weidner memo is further shameful evidence that some BLM officials, backed by the Bush administration's "cooperative attitude," as Weidner puts it, are not the stewards and responsible managers of public lands that the law mandates they should be.

On the contrary, they appear quite comfortable in their role as energy industry enablers, at the expense of the irreplaceable lands they are charged with fairly managing for the rest of us.

The memo describes a complicity that is at least improper and at worst illegal among public officials and oil and gas companies to exclude environmental advocates and the citizenry at large from decisions about which public lands should be opened to drilling.