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EDITORIAL

No More 'Candy Store'

Ken Salazar promised as the interior secretary to strike a better balance between the need for oil and gas development and the need to protect public lands in the Rocky Mountain West. In the Bush years, it was all about the drilling. The administration aggressively leased out millions of acres of public land and issued more than 50,000 drilling permits, in many cases risking wildlife habitat and ignoring legally mandated environmental reviews.

Mr. Salazar, who last year rescinded some potentially destructive leases in Utah, has taken another important step. At a news conference last week, he announced that the Bureau of Land Management — the agency that manages the bulk of the public lands — would now conduct more rigorous reviews of proposed leases, increase its consultation with other public agencies charged with protecting the environment and allow for more input from the public on future drilling decisions.

The bureau, he declared bluntly, would no longer be a “candy store” for an oil and gas industry that (mixing his metaphors) had been allowed to act like “kings of the world” during the Bush years.

This drew a predictably wounded response from industry and its political patrons like Representative Dan Boren, an Oklahoma Democrat, who called Mr. Salazar’s comments “beyond the pale” and an “insult” to an industry already in “misery.”

Last time we looked, the oil and gas business remains robustly profitable, despite falling gas prices. Besides, as Mr. Salazar observed, the industry can only gain if environmental rules are enforced because there will be fewer lawsuits and more certainty. Nor is Mr. Salazar opposed to oil and gas exploration, which he knows is an important component of the nation’s energy mix. What he does oppose is the destruction of fragile lands.

Mr. Salazar has more to do. Still ahead are important decisions involving offshore leasing in the Arctic, where we hope he will show similar restraint. And he should review and rectify some of the Bureau of Land Management’s previous blunders, including indiscriminate leasing and permitting in the Upper Green River Valley in Wyoming, a wildlife-rich area where the agency has been sued in court for skirting the law and ignoring public protests.

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