

Judge gives sides more time in disputed lease sale

The federal judge who blocked oil- and gas-lease sales on more than 103,000 acres of scenic public land in southern and eastern Utah has postponed further legal action to give the Obama administration time to figure out how to respond.

Judge Ricardo Urbina extended the deadline for the government to file additional briefs until Feb. 6. The seven conservation and historical preservation organizations that sued to stop the Dec. 19 lease sale will have until Feb. 26 to reply.

Urbina issued a temporary restraining order Saturday against the Interior Department and the Bureau of Land Management after finding that the BLM failed to properly consider potential damage to air quality and ancient rock art before selling oil and gas leases on sensitive public lands in Utah.

The groups sued to block the lease sale two days before it was held. Urbina's order blocking the challenged leases will remain in effect until he rules on the plaintiffs' request for a preliminary injunction.

John Podesta, who headed President Barack Obama's transition team, criticized the lease sale before it was held, calling it a "mistake" Obama likely would review when deciding which Bush administration actions to overturn.

Patty Henetz