

 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Salazar puts brakes on fast-track drilling

By The Daily Sentinel

Thursday, January 07, 2010

Managing the extraction of natural resources from public lands is always a balancing act — protecting the environment while allowing for development of resources that meet important national needs.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar balanced the scales back toward the environmental end of that spectrum Wednesday, with new rules for oil and gas leasing on federal lands.

Although the new rules quickly drew criticism from industry officials, we believe they can be a reasonable step toward a more consistent approach to oil and gas leasing on federal lands.

The Daily Sentinel was a frequent critic of the Bush administration's pedal-to-the-metal approach to leasing. Especially during its last couple of years, the administration's goal seemed to be to get as much federal land leased as possible before Bush left the White House, with little regard to environmental considerations. Fast track provisions allowed many leasing decisions to be exempt from detailed environmental examinations and required federal land managers to quickly evaluate any areas that industry officials nominated for leasing.

While that may have speeded up initial leasing, it didn't always work to the benefit of industry, as Salazar noted Wednesday. In 2008, fully 40 percent of federal oil and gas leases were protested, causing delays and occasionally resulting in overturning lease decisions. That compares with only 1 percent of leases being protested in 1998.

Any system that reduces legal challenges and adds to certainty for energy companies and other public lands users would be a great improvement.

Salazar's department approved nearly 3 million acres of onshore leases in 2009. That's certainly not consistent with critics' claims that he is trying to halt oil and gas leasing on federal lands.

But Salazar needs to be sensitive to industry concerns that the new rules have potential for creating excessive and unnecessary delays. As he puts together his "energy reform team" that he announced as part of his new rules, he must ensure that the team maintains the standard of allowing access to this important national resource, and in a timely manner.

Vote for this story!

Find this article at:

http://www.gjsentinel.com/opin/content/news/opinion/stories/2010/01/07/010810_4A_drill_edit.html