

Wharton: Oil leases don't meet smell test

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Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 11/15/2008 12:51:53 PM MST

There are certain places in the world so special, even sacred, that they should never be developed. Proposed oil-drilling leases on Bureau of Land Management property near Arches and Canyonlands national parks, Desolation Canyon and Dinosaur National Monument fit in that category. It is difficult to imagine oil rigs marring the world-class landscapes around these places or to figure out why people we pay and trust to be stewards of the land would ruin them.

What makes the proposed Dec. 19 leases especially maddening is the sleazy, secretive way the BLM issued them. You know these proposals don't meet the smell test when they are hidden from a sister agency such as the National Park Service, when every effort has been made to obscure what is actually happening from the public and when they are being done by a lame-duck presidential administration headed by two oil men.

You know the BLM is in bed with the oil industry when it issues a vague notice for the leases on the afternoon of a presidential election in hopes no one will notice. Then, when the press and public find out what is going on, the agency does everything it can to obscure its actual intentions.

You know that mischief, perhaps of a political nature, is afoot when the agency even starts proposing to exercise drilling rights in a Moab neighborhood. Are the agency and the oil industry trying to teach some of the area's tree-hugging, development-opposing environmentalists a lesson?

And, finally, you know just how awful these proposed leases are when the incoming Obama administration makes figuring out how to void them when it takes office in January one of its priorities.

It is difficult to believe that career professionals within the BLM are not embarrassed by how the Bush administration has politicized the environmental protection process in a rush to issue as many drilling leases as possible before it leaves office.

Yes, we need energy to run our economy. Because our automakers have concentrated on making gas-guzzling SUVs, our Congress has been in the pocket of the oil industry and we have ignored the coming energy crisis for years. We are going to need to have some limited domestic drilling and continue to use coal for power while developing new technology to run our energy-dependent society.

But do Utahns really want the short-term gain such drilling might bring when it could threaten the long-term viability of the state's tourist industry? Don't we deserve a government that listens to the public and doesn't try to hide its actions? Forget all that. It is simply wrong to industrialize these sacred places for a few drops of oil. We can only hope the Obama administration and the courts can somehow quickly correct the abuses of the BLM, an agency that should be embarrassed by the way it has been operating, especially in Utah.

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