

Uproar over federal drilling leases next to parks

By PAUL FOY – 1 day ago

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The view of Delicate Arch natural bridge — an unspoiled landmark so iconic it's on Utah's license plates — could one day include a drilling platform under a proposal that environmentalists call a Bush administration "fire sale" for the oil and gas industry.

Late on Election Day, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management announced a Dec. 19 auction of more than 50,000 acres of oil and gas parcels alongside or within view of Arches National Park and two other redrock national parks in Utah: Dinosaur and Canyonlands.

The National Park Service's top official in the state calls it "shocking and disturbing" and says his agency wasn't properly notified. Environmentalists call it a "fire sale" for the oil and gas industry by a departing administration.

Officials of the BLM, which oversees millions of acres of public land in the West, say the sale is nothing unusual, and one is "puzzled" that the Park Service is upset.

"We find it shocking and disturbing," said Cordell Roy, the chief Park Service administrator in Utah. "They added 51,000 acres of tracts near Arches, Dinosaur and Canyonlands without telling us about it. That's 40 tracts within four miles of these parks."

Top aides to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne stepped into the fray, ordering the sister agencies to make amends. His press secretary, Shane Wolfe, told The Associated Press that deputy Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett "resolved the dispute within 24 hours" last week.

A compromise ordered by the Interior Department requires the BLM to "take quite seriously" the Park Service's objections, said Wolfe.

However, the BLM didn't promise to pull any parcels from the sale, and in an interview after the supposed truce, BLM state director Selma Sierra was defiant, saying she saw nothing wrong with drilling near national parks.

"I'm puzzled the Park Service has been as upset as they are," said Sierra.

"There are already many parcels leased around the parks. It's not like they've never been leased," she said. "I don't see it as something we are doing to undermine the Park Service."

Roy and conservation groups dispute that, saying never before has the bureau bunched drilling parcels on the fence lines of national parks.

"This is the fire sale, the Bush administration's last great gift to the oil and gas industry," said Stephen Bloch, a staff attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

"The tracts of land offered here, next to Arches National Park or above Desolation Canyon, these are the crown jewels of America's lands that the BLM is offering to the highest bidder," he said.

An examination of the parcels, superimposing low-resolution government graphics onto Google Earth maps, shows that in one case drilling parcels bordering Arches National Park are just 1.3 miles from Delicate Arch.

"If you're standing at Delicate Arch, like thousands of people do every year, and you're looking through the arch, you could see drill pads on the hillside behind it. That's how ridiculous this proposed lease sale is," said Franklin Seal, a spokesman for the environmental group Wildland CPR.

In all, the BLM is moving to open 359,000 more acres in Utah to drilling.

Other Utah leases that are certain to draw objections from conservation groups include high cliffs along whitewater sections of Desolation Canyon, which is little changed since explorer John Wesley Powell remarked in 1896 on "a region of wildest desolation" while boating down the Green River to the Grand Canyon.

Others extend to plateaus populated by big game atop Nine Mile Canyon, site of thousands of ancient rock art panels, Moab's famous Slick Rock Trail and a campground popular with thousands of mountain bikers.

Sierra, the BLM's director for Utah, said the Park Service was consulted on the broad management plans that made the sale of parcels next to national parks permissible, even if it was not given notice on which specific leases were being offered. She apologized for that omission but said notice wasn't legally required.

She said national parks want to keep oil and gas wells five to 10 miles away "but that policy doesn't exist."

Roy said the standard for an eyesore visible from a national park turns on what a "casual" observer might see.

The hostility carried over into an e-mail exchange between Sierra and Mike Snyder, the Denver-based regional Park Service director, who noted his agency's demand that BLM pull 40 to 45 drill parcels from the auction list. "You stated that you were not willing to do this," Snyder wrote Nov. 6.

Within hours, Sierra responded "These decisions and the lands available for leasing should come to no one's surprise," according to copies of the e-mails obtained from her office.

Sierra said she instructed her district and field managers to educate the park superintendents on why drilling is OK "adjacent to and near the park boundaries."

In the e-mail, Sierra boasted of having "a very good working relationship" with Roy, the federal coordinator in Utah for the Park Service, but in an interview he said he had "no idea this sale was coming down the pike."

Roy said that when he asked Sierra what was going on, she replied: "We added some tracts, sorry we didn't notify you. We can take up these concerns when we issue" drilling permits. He said his response was: "Holy cow."

Sierra didn't dispute this account, but said "I don't think I was in a mood that dismissed his concerns lightly." She said she had promised only to review the objections, parcel by parcel, before the auction is held Dec. 19.

On the Net:

- Arches Nat'l Park: <http://www.nps.gov/arch/>

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