

Protests pour in against drilling leases

Deadline reached » Thursday was the last day to challenge the BLM's Dec. 19 mineral rights sale.

[By Patty Henetz](#)
[The Salt Lake Tribune](#)

Updated: 12/04/2008 06:33:02 PM MST

Protests rolled in Thursday against the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's upcoming oil and gas lease sale: Preservationists, conservationists, archaeologists, businesses, river runners, anglers and hunters criticized plans to allow drilling in some of Utah's most sensitive and popular public lands.

The protests challenge BLM's willingness to auction leases on lands near the White River, the greater Desolation Canyon region, Labyrinth Canyon, the benches east of Canyonlands National Park, Nine Mile Canyon, the Book Cliffs and the Deep Creek Mountains.

About 276,000 acres -- more than 430 square miles -- are up for lease Dec. 19 during the BLM's regular quarterly sale in Utah, the last under the Bush administration, which has made opening the West to drilling one of its signature policies.

Criticism from conservationists, the National Park Service, members of Congress and the head of President-elect Barack Obama's transition team, who said the lease sale should be halted or altered to accommodate environmental concerns, has prompted the BLM to pull back from its original proposal to lease 360,000 acres.

But plenty of anger remains.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership's protest centers on 188,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat in Utah. Other groups -- including the Colorado Plateau Archaeological Alliance, Nine Mile Canyon Coalition, Utah Rock Art Research Association and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, focus on the archaeological, historic and natural resources of the greater Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin that spans the Utah-Nevada state line.

The Denver-based Outdoor Industry Association, a main sponsor of the Outdoor Retailer trade shows staged twice a year in Salt Lake City, filed a protest, as did the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and a group of Utah-based river guides and outfitters.

A BLM spokeswoman said the agency wouldn't be able to tally the protests received by Thursday's 4:30 p.m. deadline until Friday. The agency must finalize its sale list by Dec. 12.

phenetz@sltrib.com