

Oil lays waste to the West

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On Election Day, the Bureau of Land Management in Utah quietly announced its last round of oil and gas lease sales for the year.

On Dec. 19, close to 400,000 acres of America's redrock wilderness -- much of it adjacent to Arches and Canyonlands national parks and Dinosaur National Monument -- were to be sold for drilling to the highest bidders.

Public outcry was fierce. The National Park Service had not been consulted, as it usually was, and much of the land listed for auction had long been proposed for wilderness protection.

The BLM succumbed to the pressure and met with the National Park Service, which asked that 93 oil and gas leases be removed from the list. The BLM backed off 22 parcels, and later deferred other leases in sensitive areas.

From a cynical perspective, the lease sale announcement could be seen as a fire the BLM set intentionally around the edges of Utah's most precious natural treasures, knowing it could extinguish the flames, emerge as a reasonable land steward and still get what its current boss, the Bush administration, wants -- more and more public land in the American West to exploit.

President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, riding bareback and backward in the last gasp of their fossil-fuel governance, are holding fast to their dictum that what is good for the oil business is good for the country.

In the interior West, we know this is a lie. Just look at Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah and see how they have been laid to waste, a wide-open wound in America's failed energy policy.

The long horizon, emblematic of our wide open spaces, is disappearing. Thousands of oil and gas rigs interrupt the sea of sage. Public lands are pumped and pimped. Pronghorn antelope, known for their agility and speed, are no longer running but sitting in the midst of a cobweb of roads -- an act of defiance or resignation, it's hard to know.

When you walk onto an oil patch, instead of a night sky of stars, oil derricks are lit up like marquees in Las Vegas, and you can forget you are in Boulder, Wyo., or Vernal, Utah, or Rifle, Colo.

Consider the Jonah Field, an oil and gas development in southwestern Wyoming where, in 2008, the town of Pinedale experienced its first ozone alert and where water wells have been found to be contaminated, some with benzene.

Or the Powder River Basin, just outside Gillette, Wyo., where a knock on your ranch-house door may be followed by the news that while you own the surface rights to your land, the federal government has the mineral rights, and it just sold them to an oil company. Within days, a road is cut, drilling begins and the wellheads, compressor stations and processing plants are constructed, regardless of your sentiments, livelihood or well-being.

Among many Westerners, the consensus is this: We are not against oil and gas development. We are against the greed, speed and scale of it.

This is not about energy independence but the oil and gas industry's dependence on an oil-loyal administration to do its bidding. The integrity of our public lands depends on the integrity of our public process within the open space of democracy. This process is being abused and violated.

The Dec. 19 lease sale in Utah is just the latest symptom of the problem. The parcels were chosen under the cover of new BLM management plans that will guide the state's land policy for the next 20 years. To witness these plans is to witness a governing mind wedded to fragmentation, not wholeness.

According to such environmental groups as the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, the plans were finalized in October and November with an eye to fast-tracking the lease sales before Bush's term runs out. In addition to allowing oil and gas drilling, they open 20,000 miles of backcountry trails to off-road vehicle use, putting in jeopardy wildlife habitat, rivers and streams and important cultural and archaeological sites.

Once parcels are leased, a new administration would find it hard to undo the deals. And once parcels are developed, their possible wilderness designation would most likely become moot.

These acts of greed come at the expense of a geography so stark and arresting that it renders one mute. The hands of erosion cut windows in sandstone; a spire, an arch or a natural bridge frame a sunset. The curvature of the Earth is not only seen but felt. Burnished and bronzed through time, this geologic architecture has inspired our American character, where self-reliance is predicated on humility, not arrogance

Inherent in these wild lands is an intact ecosystem and ecological resiliency in the face of climate change -- plant and animal diversity, functioning watersheds and soil conservation. This natural wealth is in stark contrast to the negligible resources the oil companies want to extract: The federal Energy Information Administration says that Utah holds less than 1 percent of the United States' known oil reserves.

The BLM has been forced to curtail the Dec. 19 lease sale, but 275,000 acres are still slated for the auction block, and the new management plans are still in place.

"Deferred" leases can just keep appearing on quarterly sales for decades, and the fight over Utah's wild lands will go on unless we, the people, act. We should see to it that Congress passes America's Redrock Wilderness Act in 2009. It would once and for all put 9.4 million acres of Utah redrock wilderness in reserve, where it belongs.

The last-minute land grab in Utah's spectacular desert must be seen for what it is: not a boon for business but a bankruptcy of the imagination. What is actually being sold is the soul of a nation, one public parcel at a time.

Williams is a writer who lives in Utah and Wyoming. Her most recent book, "Finding Beauty in a Broken World," was published in October.