
November 7, 2008**EDITORIAL**

Another Parting Gift

Gale Norton has to be happy. In 2003, Ms. Norton, then President Bush's secretary of the interior (and now a senior oil executive at Royal Dutch Shell), struck a deal with the governor of Utah that would open about 3 million pristine acres of federal land to oil and gas drilling.

Environmental groups and the courts managed to keep the drillers at bay. No longer. In the last few days, the Bureau of Land Management has completed six long-range management plans for Utah that will expose these acres (and as many as 6 million more) to some form of commercial exploitation.

On Tuesday, the bureau announced that it would soon begin selling oil and gas leases — essentially the right to drill — in some of the most beautiful and fragile areas.

Conservationists are aghast, and rightly so. Apparently without consulting the National Parks Service, one of its sister agencies at the Interior Department, the bureau plans to auction more than two dozen leases adjacent to Arches National Park and very close to Canyonlands National Park, risking the parks' air and water.

Also on the auction block, among other rare and spectacular vistas, is Desolation Canyon, so named by the explorer John Wesley Powell in 1869 while he traveled down the Green River to the Grand Canyon.

This sort of pillage would be hard to justify even if Utah's reserves were large enough to make a difference, which they are not. The Energy Information Administration says that Utah has 2.5 percent of the country's known natural gas reserves and less than 1 percent of its known oil reserves. And even if those reserves were worth going after, it would still be essential to protect areas of special cultural, scenic and recreational value.

The Interior Department's writ is to manage the public lands for "multiple uses," a difficult and ambiguous task. The Clinton administration issued many leases but tried hard to balance the competing claims of commerce and nature; the Bush administration heard only the voice of Vice President Dick Cheney and his one-sided mantra of "drill now, drill everywhere."

This is but the latest of President Bush's last-minute assaults on the environment. The incoming Obama administration will have to quickly review and reverse these decisions or find ways to mitigate the damage.

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