

BLM, Park Service at odds over drilling near Utah parks

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A high-level fight has erupted within the Interior Department between the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service over plans to sell leases for oil and gas drilling near Arches, Canyonlands and Dinosaur National Monument.

The Park Service wants to delay the Dec. 19 lease sales. The BLM has refused to do so.

"We're not anti-oil and gas but we're very much pro-park," said Denver-based Park Service regional director Mike Snyder. "I'm not saying not to put those up for a lease sale. I'm just asking they wait until the next quarter."

Snyder said the Park Service needs more time and more information from the BLM about the sale, which involves nearly 360,000 acres of federal land in Utah, to fulfill its responsibility as protectors of the parks.

But when Snyder called Utah's BLM director, Selma Sierra, about an hour before the Election Day lease-sale announcement to request that the parcels near the parks be withdrawn, she refused, he said.

The BLM said Friday that the Park Service has been a full participant in developing long-range land-use plans during the past seven years and stressed that the agency had modified or improved environmental constraints.

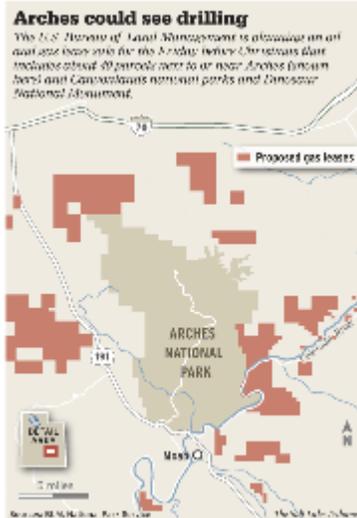
BLM officials did not say why they denied the Park Service request to defer the parcels.

The Park Service said getting details about the sales has proved difficult. The agency found out about them only through a tip from a conservation group.

The BLM routinely holds quarterly lease sales. Normally, Snyder explained, the Park Service sees the list of such parcels three months in advance and has 30 days to file comments.

On Thursday, the BLM said the list had been available to the Park Service in August. Snyder noted that tally didn't include disputed parcels.

In an e-mail to The Salt Lake Tribune on Friday afternoon, BLM spokeswoman Megan Crandall acknowledged the oversight. "Even so," she wrote, "such notification is not legally mandated, but a step that enhances communication between federal agencies."



That communication was mandated in a 1993 accord, which expired in 1998. "It's a practice that was begun with a formal agreement," said Cordell Roy, Utah's Park Service coordinator, and had been followed ever since.

Until now. The BLM stayed quiet this time. Roy heard about the sale from a conservation organization two working days before the BLM's announcement late Tuesday afternoon.

That release offered no maps or details about the sale for the Park Service or the public to see. Instead, the BLM said it wouldn't offer parcels in wilderness study areas and added that recently completed long-term resource-management plans "provide administrative protection for these natural areas - a few of which are available for leasing under the most stringent restrictions."

After days of wrangling, the BLM said late Friday it would make easier-to-read maps available to the public at the agency's Salt Lake City office.

Many of the 241 parcels on BLM-controlled lands had been largely off-limits to new oil and gas drilling after a series of federal court and administrative decisions overturned earlier leasing decisions. The lands in question aren't wilderness study areas. But the BLM, in its own surveys, has declared these parcels to be wilderness-caliber landscapes. Opening them to drilling could prevent them from ever gaining wilderness status.

The BLM lease parcels include large swaths considered worthy of wilderness status, including artifact-rich Nine Mile Canyon, Desolation Canyon and areas around Dinosaur National Monument in eastern Utah. Tracts abutting Arches National Park and near Canyonlands National Park in southeastern Utah also are on the block.

Moab resident and outfitter Ashley Korenblat hasn't seen the maps, but has heard enough about the sales to worry about how they might damage Arches and the area economy.

Korenblat runs Western Spirit Cycling, which leads bike trips in national parks. Drilling would be bad for business, she said.

"It's not a world-class outing if you can see oil wells," she said. "They aren't measuring the net loss [to the economy]. Anything that jeopardizes that for short-term gain is just stupid."

The BLM's actions are part of a larger pattern, according to an Oct. 22 report by Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., chairman of the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands subcommittee. In the report, Grijalva accused the Bush administration of "assaults" on national parks, national forests and BLM lands.

Grijalva said Interior has been releasing information when the public is least likely to notice, such as before holiday weekends, and has provided only limited time for public response.

An example the congressman found particularly egregious was the administration's decision to allow commercial uranium mining on public land "dangerously close" to the Grand Canyon. When the House Committee on Natural Resources passed a resolution in June under a rarely invoked provision of the Federal Land Policy Management Act that would require Interior to withdraw the land from mining claims for a year, Interior defied the committee. The mining continues.

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