

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 11, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: Proposed Oil & Gas Lease Sale for Public Lands in Southern Utah

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

We are concerned with the upcoming September 2020 oil and gas lease sale in southern Utah, which will put some of the most fragile, scenic, and popular landscapes of the region at serious risk. This proposed lease sale threatens roughly 87,000 acres of potential wilderness areas bordering Canyonlands National Park and Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness and includes parcels close to Arches National Park and Capitol Reef National Park. Development of these parcels would threaten to ruin the stunning scenic beauty and visitors' use and enjoyment of these iconic national parks, redrock canyons, and mesas with drill rigs, pipelines, and natural gas flaring. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to drive down demand for oil and gas leases on public lands while oil and gas wells are being shut-in or abandoned at unprecedented rates, providing little economic justification for this sale. We urge the Department of the Interior to cancel this lease sale.

It was a positive sign to see the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) postpone all six of the agency's oil and gas lease sales scheduled for May and June. Whether it was because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rock-bottom prices of oil and gas, or another unstated reason hidden behind BLM's refusal to offer an explanation for the postponements, we were pleased to see the agency acknowledge that quarterly lease sales are not mandatory, and may be postponed when circumstances warrant.¹ Other leasing agencies have taken similar steps: the Utah School Institutional and Trust Lands Administration has cancelled each of its last three oil and gas lease sales, in part "due to continued industry effects from the COVID-19 pandemic."²

Even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, industry interest in leasing Utah's public lands had declined dramatically. At the past three lease sales in Utah, BLM sold just 47 percent of the more than 228,000 acres offered for lease. Of the acres that did sell, well over half sold for the minimum bid of \$2.00/acre. In Grand County – home to Arches and Canyonlands – all of the leases that sold at these sales went for the minimum bid, which earned the State of Utah less than \$9,000 in revenue.

¹ Erickson, Camille. Federal government postpones Wyoming oil and gas lease sale, Casper Star Tribune, June 15, 2020 - https://trib.com/business/energy/federal-government-postpones-wyoming-oil-and-gas-lease-sale/article_90f144f4-ec9a-573e-b0c0-a8f374e940ac.html.

² Utah Trust Lands Administration, Competitive Mineral Lease Offering - <https://trustlands.utah.gov/business-groups/oil-gas/competitive-mineral-lease-offerings/>.

Further highlighting the fiscal irresponsibility of holding new lease sales now is that BLM has recently granted royalty relief for nearly 50 leases in Grand County, Utah, many of which surround Canyonlands National Park, including leases that are adjacent to those proposed to be auctioned off at the September 2020 sale. It is inconsistent with the Department's fiscal responsibilities to the American taxpayers to reduce the royalty rate for existing leases while taking steps to issue new leases for adjoining and nearby lands.

This proposed sale is also of concern to local officials, including Grand County Council Chairwoman Mary McGann, who recently said, "... when you look at that map, it just sends chills up your spine."³ Similar sentiments have been shared by other officials, including Moab City councilmember Kalen Jones, who stated, "This is a massive industrial development that traverses some of our prime recreational areas. This dwarfs everything else already leased in the area."⁴

This proposed lease sale is reminiscent of the December 2008 Utah lease sale during the President George W. Bush administration, which included some of the same public lands and resulted in a huge public outcry, a restraining order halting issuance of the leases by the Bush administration, and eventually cancellation and refund of the lease bids. The ongoing pandemic, economic downturn, and ever-increasing climate challenges makes the leasing and development of these public lands even more ill-advised now than in 2008.

We urge you to cancel the proposed Utah lease sale currently scheduled for September 2020.

Regards,



Alan Lowenthal
Chair
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral
Resources



Raúl Grijalva
Chair
House Natural Resources Committee

³ Magill, Bobby, Aaron Kessler. Interior Oil Leasing Near Parks Compared to Despoiling a Picasso, Bloomberg Law, May 13, 2020 - <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/interior-oil-leasing-near-parks-compared-to-despoiling-a-picasso>.

⁴ Groetzinger, Kate. The BLM Could Lease Over 100,000 Acres Of Public Land Around Moab To Energy Companies, KUER 90.1, NPR Utah, May 8, 2020 - <https://www.kuer.org/post/blm-could-lease-over-100000-acres-public-land-around-moab-energy-companies#stream/0>.

/s/
Nydia Velázquez
Member of Congress

/s/
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress

/s/
Deb Haaland
Member of Congress

/s/
Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress

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Ro Khanna
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/s/
Mike Levin
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/s/
A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress

cc: William Perry Pendley, Deputy Director, Policy & Programs, Exercising the Authority of the Director
Greg Sheehan, Utah State Director
Gary Torres, Canyon Country District Manager