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Oil, gas leases

BLM cuts scope of auction in half

Bureau defers action on 42 land parcels in wake of environmental protests

By **Steven Oberbeck**
The Salt Lake Tribune

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Responding to protests from environmental groups and hunting and fishing interests, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management has slashed by half the size of today's auction of oil and gas leases in Utah.

The BLM said it will offer at its auction this morning 39 parcels of oil and gas leases encompassing about 68,521 acres in Juab, Millard, Rich, San Juan, Summit and Uintah counties. However, it originally planned to auction mineral leases to 81 properties, or about 141,000 acres.

"We've deferred action on 42 parcels so that we can go back and revisit all of our data and documentation to make sure that we didn't make any errors in offering those properties for lease," said Terry Catlin, energy support team leader at the BLM's Utah office in Salt Lake City.

Under federal law, BLM state offices are required to hold an auction of oil and gas leases at least four times a year. As part of that process, anyone can file a protest questioning whether it is appropriate for the agency to offer any or all of the properties for lease.

"We've been trying to be more careful about the properties we offer because we don't think it is fair if someone bids on a parcel and then has the lease held up because there was a protest on that property," Catlin said.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a five-year-old organization set up to preserve "the traditions of hunting and fishing," protested the inclusion of 29 parcels in the auction.

"The BLM was pursuing energy leasing on some of Utah's best mule deer habitat," said Joel Webster, a field representative for the group. "We'd like to work with them to try and come up with an approach to energy development that also can help reduce the impacts on fish, wildlife and sportsmen because parcels are leased."

Another group, the Center for Native Ecosystems, asked the BLM to withdraw 21 parcels, claiming energy development on those properties would impact the habitat of the greater sage grouse, a native species whose ranges have been diminished by as much as 70 percent over the last 100 years.

"This is a species that is really being impacted by oil and gas development. It is one of the iconic species of what was once a vast sage grass sea in this country. And its problems are indicative of

wider troubles across our whole landscape," said Josh Pollock, conservation director for the Center for Native Ecosystems.

All 21 of the parcels that the center was concerned about were withdrawn from the auction, Pollock said. "Many of those parcels were the same properties that other groups such as the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and the Teddy Roosevelt organization also expressed concerns about."

The Utah Council of Trout Unlimited protested the inclusion of two parcels in the auction that it believes threaten the fisheries in the Rockport Reservoir, the Weber River and the Echo Reservoir and the potential habitat for native cutthroat trout.

Catlin noted that despite withdrawing about half of the parcels, the auction still will be larger than the previous auction held in May, when the BLM sold the drilling rights to 27 parcels comprising 38,657 acres for \$8.8 million.

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