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Utah BLM auction called off

Office wants to study the wildlife habitats on leasable parcels

By **Steven Oberbeck**
 The Salt Lake Tribune

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The Utah office of the federal Bureau of Land Management has canceled its November lease sale so it can further analyze the impact of oil and gas drilling on the wildlife habitat of properties it had offered.

The decision marks the first time in two decades that the BLM has called off a quarterly oil and gas lease auction in Utah, said Terry Catlin, a BLM energy team leader in Salt Lake City.

"There was one other sale canceled about 20 years ago, and I believe that may have been because there was just a lack of demand," Catlin said. "I'm not aware of us ever having canceled a lease sale specifically for wildlife reasons."

The BLM canceled the Nov. 13 auction after the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources presented information that about 139,000 of the 141,000 leasable acres constituted summer habitat for wildlife. Those 139,000 acres encompassed 84 of the 86 parcels BLM initially planned to offer for lease.

"We realized more study was needed," she said.

The BLM has grown increasingly cautious about critical wildlife habitat after the Interior Board of Land Appeals sided last year with the Center for Native Ecosystems in an appeal that questioned the adequacy of environmental studies on several parcels offered in a 2003 lease sale.

The Denver-based center claimed those parcels near Vernal contain critical habitat for prairie dog colonies

and that BLM failed to adequately consider the effect leasing might have on a black-footed ferret reintroduction program that could help save that species from extinction.

"It makes sense for the BLM to take time and do a good, thorough analysis that looks at the impacts on the fragile wildlife of the lands they are considering for leasing," said Megan Corrigan, a Center for Native Ecosystems staff biologist. "Once that property gets turned over to the energy companies, it is too late."

Corrigan said the ruling by the Interior Board of Land Appeals could have implications in other states where BLM may have offered lands for lease before looking hard at the potential impact of oil and gas drilling on wildlife.

Although the November oil and gas lease sale was called off, Catlin said the BLM already is preparing for February's scheduled quarterly sale. Included in that sale will be two parcels near Price that the BLM would have been comfortable offering in November.

While it may be unusual for the BLM to cancel a quarterly sale, it isn't unusual for the agency to withdraw acreage based on concerns raised by environmental groups or hunting and fishing interests.

For instance, the BLM originally intended to offer oil and gas leases on about 141,000 acres in August, but ended up auctioning only 68,521 acres in Juab, Millard, Rich, San Juan, Summit and Uintah counties.

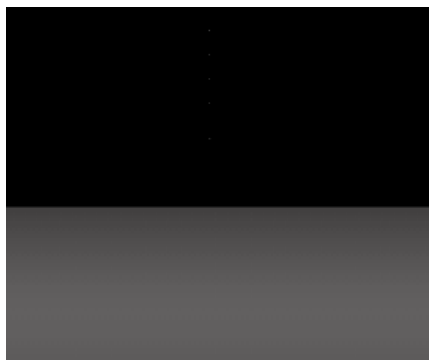
The remainder was withdrawn following protests by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a five-year-old organization set up to preserve "the traditions of hunting and fishing."

Foundation field representative Joel Webster said the November auction was called off before anyone had a chance to review the potential wildlife-habitat impacts on the offered properties.

"But we're more than willing to work with the BLM to ensure that adequate environmental studies are conducted on all leases where wildlife could be potentially impacted," he said.

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