

Washington, DC - One day after the Obama administration reversed a last minute decision by the Bush administration to lease wilderness quality lands in Utah to oil and gas companies, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) and Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) led 73 other House members in pressing the current administration to defer any future lease sales involving major swaths of land being considered for protection through wilderness designations by Congress.

The House members, who have all either sponsored or cosponsored legislation to protect lands that are the subject of future lease sales, applauded yesterday's decision by the Obama administration concerning more than 100,000 acres in Utah and said it would be appropriate for the administration to delay future lease sales until it has time to review the proposals Congress has initiated to safeguard millions of public acres across the United States.

"In order to prevent the conveyance of more sensitive lands to the oil and gas industry, we strongly urge you to direct the BLM and the Forest Service to defer future lease sales of all public land under their jurisdiction that have been the subject of legislation in the 110th Congress that would designate them as wilderness or another protective status," Hinchey, Maloney and their 73 colleagues wrote in a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "Doing so will allow your agencies time to further review the suitability of such tracts for leasing and development, while allowing oil and gas activities to continue on the tens of millions of acres of federal lands currently under lease...By putting a temporary hold on the leasing of these precious acres, your agencies would have time to review the merits of offering such areas for sale and provide Congress with an opportunity to safeguard that land forever."

Under the direction of the Bush administration, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in December 2008 offered lease sales on more than 100,000 acres of sensitive public lands in Utah, 45,000 of which have been the subject of legislation in Congress -- the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act -- that would designate them as wilderness. The America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which Hinchey has authored since 1994, would designate as wilderness roughly 45,000 of the acres protected yesterday along with nearly 9 million other acres of pristine land in Utah, some of which has been the subject of other future lease sales.

Many of the acres that Interior Secretary Salazar helped block from lease sales yesterday are in close proximity to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and Dinosaur National Monument. Other parcels would negatively impact the unmatched wild nature of Desolation Canyon on the

Green River, the remote Book Cliffs, as well as the world's largest outdoor art gallery -- an archaeological treasure trove known as Nine Mile Canyon.

As a last ditch attempt to help its friends and allies in the oil and gas industry, the Bush administration finalized six new Resource Management Plans (RMP) in October 2008 that called for 11 million acres of public land in Utah to be leased for energy production. The former administration did so despite the fact that oil and gas companies already have enormous swaths of land on which they have yet to produce.

Of the 89.7 million acres of on and offshore public land already leased by oil and gas companies only a little more than 25 percent has been used by those companies to produce energy. The Bush administration's lease RMPs in Utah were the result of private meetings between former Vice President Dick Cheney and top energy company executives who sought to raise their record profits to even higher levels.

"We are convinced that the new administration can have an onshore oil and gas program that both helps meet America's energy needs, and at the same time protects for future generations those lands that harbor a wealth of environmental, wildlife, and cultural values," Hinchey, Maloney and their 73 colleagues wrote to Salazar and Vilsack. "We believe that in order to bring the balance needed to achieve both goals, your agencies will need to move very early in 2009 to halt the conveyance of more leases earmarked for sale by the Bush administration on lands proposed for protection. Unless such action takes place very soon, more sensitive lands that should be protected will be dedicated to inappropriate oil and gas development activities."

Hinchey's America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which was originally proposed in a similar form in 1989 by former Utah Congressman Wayne Owens, would ensure the 9.4 million acres in Utah remain wild in their natural state, and strictly prohibit mining, road and dam construction, off-road vehicle use, and other activities that would destroy the area's special character. Non-consumptive uses such as hunting, fishing, camping, backpacking, hiking, and horseback riding would be permitted and grazing rights existing at the time of any wilderness designation would also be unaffected.

Maloney is the author of the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, which would designate all of the remaining roadless lands in the Northern Rockies as wilderness, the strongest protection the federal government can confer on public lands. Specifically, the bill would designate as wilderness nearly 7 million acres of wilderness in Montana, 9.5 million acres

of wilderness in Idaho, 5 million acres of wilderness in Wyoming, 750,000 acres in eastern Oregon, and 500,000 acres in eastern Washington. Included in this total is over 3 million acres in Yellowstone, Glacier and Grand Teton National Parks.

Unless the Obama administration defers future action, lease sales scheduled under the Bush administration's RMPs will move forward on land subject to congressional protection. New federal onshore oil and gas lease sales planned under the Bush administration by the BLM are slated to occur later this month in Wyoming and Colorado and next month in other parts of Utah.

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The full text of the letter from Hinchey, Maloney, and their 73 House colleagues to Salazar and Vilsack follows:

February 5, 2009

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Honorable Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Interior
Department of Agriculture
1849 C Street, NW
Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary

The
Secretary
U.S.
1400 Independence
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Salazar and Secretary Vilsack:

Please accept our heartfelt congratulations on your appointments as Secretary of Interior and Secretary of Agriculture. We look forward to working with you in your new capacities and

anticipate positive changes on many fronts at the Departments of Interior and Agriculture.

As sponsors and cosponsors of legislation in the 110th Congress that would permanently protect precious acres of land in the United States through wilderness or other similar designations, we appreciate the action you took yesterday in Utah, and we urge you to put a temporary hold on offering any federal oil and gas leases on the areas we're attempting to safeguard. For example, in a last ditch attempt before leaving office to give away precious public land to the oil and gas industry, the Bush administration's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made millions of acres available for lease sales. Many of those acres were the subject of legislation being considered in Congress that would have put them off limits for energy production and protected them in their natural state for this and all future generations to enjoy. By putting a temporary hold on the leasing of these precious acres, your agencies would have time to review the merits of offering such areas for sale and provide Congress with an opportunity to safeguard that land forever.

New federal onshore oil and gas lease sales planned under the Bush administration by the BLM are scheduled to occur in Montana as early as late January 2009 with additional sales scheduled in Wyoming and Colorado for February 2009 and in Utah in March 2009. As you are aware, a lease sale held by the BLM in Utah on December 19, 2008, generated national controversy because of the large number of tracts offered for sale that were located in areas long-proposed for wilderness protection, or in close proximity to National Park units.

On January 17, 2009, a federal district court judge in Washington, D.C. issued a temporary restraining order blocking BLM from issuing 77 of the most egregious leases offered at the December 19 Utah sale, and stated that the plaintiffs were likely to prevail on the merits of their case. This sale, in fact, typified the controversy surrounding the BLM's oil and gas program during the last eight years. The sales planned for 2009 likewise contain lease tracts that harbor important wilderness, wildlife, cultural and other characteristics that would ordinarily disqualify such lands for conveyance to the oil and gas industry. Your agencies have the opportunity to correct the gross imbalance that has unfortunately come to characterize the BLM's oil and gas development program – a policy that has prioritized the exploitation of federal oil and gas resources over the protection and proper stewardship of all other resources and values of our public lands.

In order to prevent the conveyance of more sensitive lands to the oil and gas industry, we strongly urge you to direct the BLM and the Forest Service to defer future lease sales of all public land under their jurisdiction that have been the subject of legislation in the 110th Congress that would designate them as wilderness or another protective status. Doing so will

allow your agencies time to further review the suitability of such tracts for leasing and development, while allowing oil and gas activities to continue on the tens of millions of acres of federal lands currently under lease. Given the recent District Court decision to halt the issuance of leases on sensitive lands in Utah, this path offers a prudent way to avoid similar court rulings in the future. It will also provide your agencies the opportunity to take further action to protect sensitive areas from development by using existing administrative authorities to temporarily or permanently withdraw such areas from future leasing. Deferring lease sales in these sensitive areas will also provide Congress with the opportunity to take action to establish permanent protection for such areas.

We are convinced that the new administration can have an onshore oil and gas program that both helps meet America's energy needs, and at the same time protects for future generations those lands that harbor a wealth of environmental, wildlife, and cultural values. We believe that in order to bring the balance needed to achieve both goals, your agencies will need to move very early in 2009 to halt the conveyance of more leases earmarked for sale by the Bush administration on lands proposed for protection. Unless such action takes place very soon, more sensitive lands that should be protected will be dedicated to inappropriate oil and gas development activities.

Sincerely,

Maurice Hinchey, Carolyn Maloney, and their 73 House Colleagues