

*Fifty-Eight Members of Congress Urge Incoming Department of Interior To Stop Oil and Gas Drilling in Pristine Areas of Utah Wilderness*

Washington, DC - Congressmen Maurice Hinchey (D-NY), Rush Holt (D-NJ), and Brian Baird (D-WA) today led a total of 58 House members in sending a letter to the Obama-Biden transition team, urging them to have the incoming U.S. Department of Interior reverse oil and gas leasing in Utah's Colorado Wilderness Plateau -- land which the Bush administration's U.S. Bureau of Land Management began auctioning off last week.

On Friday, more than 60,000 acres of sensitive public lands in Utah, proposed for wilderness designation in Congress through America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which Hinchey has authored since 1994, were auctioned off for energy development. Many of these lands are in close proximity to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and Dinosaur National Monument, while other parcels will 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, the archaeological treasure trove that is Nine Mile Canyon. These federal public lands were all made available to energy development in November when the Bush administration finalized new land-use management plans for the affected areas. Hinchey submitted formal complaints against those land-use management plans.

The following is the complete text of the letter Hinchey, Holt, Baird, and their 55 House colleagues sent to the Obama-Biden transition team today:

December 22, 2008

Obama-Biden Transition Team

Interior Department

451 6th St. NW Washington, DC 20001

Dear Interior Transition Team Members,

During the final days of the Bush Administration, a significant number of rules and policies have been finalized and last-minute decisions have been made in a clear attempt to leave a lasting imprint on the policies of future administrations. Of great concern to us is the recent decision by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to open up over 3 million acres of wilderness quality public lands in eastern and central Utah to oil and gas drilling. Utah's Colorado Wilderness Plateau holds some of this nation's most cherished publicly-owned wild landscapes and unique ecosystems, and we would like to encourage you to act quickly to protect these wilderness-quality public lands from the devastating and irreversible environmental impacts of oil and gas drilling.

In mid-November, BLM placed Utah's vulnerable wild lands at risk by finalizing six Resource Management Plans (RMP) for the Colorado Plateau allowing oil and gas drilling on lands that are currently being considered for a wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (H.R. 1919). Current members of the House of Representatives, more than 160, have cosponsored this legislation showing their agreement that these lands deserve a wilderness designation and should be protected for future generations. We are writing to ask your assistance in revising these disastrous land-use plans and reversing the oil and gas leases in the areas that H.R. 1919 seeks to protect.

Unless the Obama-Biden Administration acts to reverse these RMPs, these plans will dictate oil and gas leasing activity and off-road vehicle use for over 11 million acres of public land for the next 15-20 years. In drafting these RMPs the BLM has an opportunity to appropriately manage and protect wilderness and cultural resources on millions of acres of unprotected lands that the BLM itself has determined to have wilderness character. Instead the BLM chose not to protect these lands from damaging activity. Now, Utah's unbalanced land-use plans are having real repercussions on the land.

On November 4, Election Day, the BLM announced a December 19, 2008 oil and gas lease sale covering over 360,000 acres of public land, 60,000 acres of which is proposed for wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. The BLM rushed to move

ahead with this lease sale and in its haste excluded input from the National Park Service (NPS) and others, offering oil and gas leases on public lands adjacent to National Parks.

Outrage over this lease sale, by the NPS and the general public, has since been only marginally addressed by the BLM's recent agreement to defer on some parcels adjacent to National Park Service units and in other sensitive landscapes. Tens of thousands of acres of public land recently determined by the BLM to possess wilderness character will still be auctioned off on December 19th, 2008. We strongly urge that the Obama-Biden Administration take decisive action and either halt the leasing process for wild public lands in Utah proposed for wilderness designation in Congress, or, if the leases have already been issued, cancel these improperly issued leases and refund the high bidders' monies.

A stark choice is ahead of us. Will we continue the current short-sighted policies focused on resource extraction and motorized use of public lands or will we find the elusive balance that is needed to continue the multiple uses of public lands, while also protecting those places that we consider special and worthy of wilderness status? These Utah RMPs reflect this choice and we believe the next Interior Department should revise these terribly unbalanced management plans and cancel the inappropriate oil and gas leases that flowed from these decisions. We look forward to working together to preserve these wilderness areas for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Maurice Hinchey

Rush Holt

Brian Baird