

LIEBERMAN SAYS BLM DISREGARDS ITS OBLIGATION TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT FROM OIL AND GAS DRILLING DAMAGE

**Permits for Drilling up 255 Percent In Past Six Years
No Comparable Increase in BLM Budget, Staff for Environmental Inspections**

WASHINGTON - Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Thursday said the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management is so focused on issuing permits for oil and gas drilling that it's neglecting its responsibility to protect the land, air, water, fish, and wildlife damaged by the drilling.

Lieberman based his comments on a report he requested from the Government Accountability Office, which was made public Thursday. According to the report, the BLM is failing to fulfill its obligations to inspect well sites, to monitor the long term impact of drilling, and to ensure drillers eliminate evidence of old wells and repair and restore the land they have leased.

"This Administration appears to have lost its sense of balance between granting drilling permits to the oil and gas industry and protecting the natural wonder of the environment," Lieberman said. "Striking the right balance is BLM's statutory responsibility. Irresponsible stewardship of public lands while the oil and gas industry profits is not an acceptable balance."

BLM manages 261 million acres of public land and issues leases and drilling permits on that land for oil and gas exploration. The agency is supposed to oversee mitigation of the negative effects of development on the leased land by tracking wells that are no longer producing oil to make sure they do not become liabilities to the federal government and by ensuring that public lands on which drilling has occurred are properly reclaimed and restored so the natural beauty of the land can once again be enjoyed.

"This report sheds important new light on the Administration's shortsighted approach," Lieberman said. "Its emphasis on streamlining the process for granting drilling permits means that BLM staff spends less time remedying the environmental effects of the oil and gas drilling and more time processing drilling permit applications. To make matters worse, the House Energy bill, now in conference, would speed up the permitting process."

GAO found that oil and gas development on BLM-managed lands increased by 255 percent over the past six years: approved drilling permits rose from 1,803 in Fiscal Year 1999 to 6,399 in Fiscal Year 2004. But the BLM's oil and gas management budget rose just 64 percent and its staffing levels rose only 21 percent.

The report also found:

B The two BLM field offices that issued the largest percentage increase of drilling permits met annual inspection goals only once in the past six years. One of these offices, in Buffalo, Wyo., last met its goal in 2000. The other, in Vernal, Utah, last met its goal in 1999. Combined, the eight offices visited by GAO met their annual environmental inspections goals only about half of the time during the past six years.

B In FY 2004, the Buffalo, Wyo., field office achieved only 27 percent of its required inspection goals.

B Half of the field offices surveyed had a backlog of past due idle-well reviews.

B Seven of the eight field offices had a backlog of reclamation inspections.

B Half of the field offices have failed to develop any resource monitoring plans. The report specifically noted that heavy workload associated with processing drilling permits has slowed the development of resource monitoring plans in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming.