

# Casper Star Tribune

Dec. 7, 2006

## BLM pulls energy leases

By *WHITNEY ROYSTER*

*Star-Tribune environmental reporter*

JACKSON -- In a rare move, U.S. Bureau of Land Management officials withdrew two parcels from a Tuesday energy lease sale upon recommendation of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

The two parcels north of Daniel in western Wyoming on BLM property are on wildlife migration routes, according to Game and Fish.

"Given the trend we have seen with intense gas development on other important wildlife habitats in Sublette County, future development within this corridor will restrict and impact mule deer and antelope movements, and sage grouse could be disturbed on this lek site," Game and Fish Deputy Director Gregg Arthur wrote in a Nov. 20 letter to BLM State Director Bob Bennett asking that the parcels be withdrawn.

On Nov. 28, the BLM posted a response on its Web site saying the two parcels would be pulled.

"(T)he Wyoming State Director has elected to withdraw them from sale until the BLM has the opportunity to address the new information submitted" by Game and Fish, wrote Pamela Lewis, chief of the BLM's Branch of Fluid Minerals Adjudication.

The two parcels are among five parcels that were also protested by several conservation groups and individuals. The BLM said the other parcels will be offered for lease "pending our complete evaluation of the issues raised in the protests." If it is determined the protests have merit, bidders will be refunded their money.

The other three parcels in the area that were offered for lease are for public mineral estate with private surface ownership.

In its letter to the BLM, Game and Fish asked that the leases be withdrawn pending a broader study of migration routes.

"We recommend the area proposed for lease be removed from the December sale in order that we can cooperatively work with the BLM-Pinedale Field Office to develop a management strategy to maintain important migration corridors in concert with escalating natural gas development throughout the Upper Green River Basin," the letter said.

Bernie Holz, Game and Fish wildlife supervisor for the Jackson/Pinedale region, said the goal is to document these important areas in the BLM's Pinedale resource management plan, which is forthcoming. That document is an overarching guiding document, determining what

areas should be available for energy development and what should not. The current plan was developed in 1988.

Holz said the withdrawn lease parcels are in a "fairly narrow area," and Game and Fish does not want it to turn into a migration bottleneck.

Jason Begger, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, said industry favors "continued access to public lands to meet America's energy needs and generally has concerns whenever lands are taken off the table."

"While we believe the BLM's decision to offer the leases was correct, we respect the decision and look forward to working with them to develop the best operating practices to protect wildlife habitat," he said.

Peter Aengst with The Wilderness Society, one of the groups that protested the five parcels near Daniel, said the fact that these leases were pulled shows that the BLM is rushing to lease acreage that is important to wildlife without adequate review, and habitat is becoming increasingly fragmented.

"Agency experts all agree that wildlife is threatened by the loss of crucial winter habitat in parts of the Upper Green," Aengst said. "This lease sale is another piece of a troubling puzzle concerning the BLM's attitude toward wildlife and our local quality of life. Not only did BLM again try to lease in a big game migration route, but they continue to grant exceptions for winterlong drilling in crucial big game habitat when forage is poor."

Other lease parcels in the Wyoming Range were protested in the last year, and a federal land management board agreed the protests likely had merit, and issued a halt against development on those parcels.

Another large study looking in part at waiving winter seasonal restrictions on the Pinedale Anticline natural gas field is expected this month.

Increasingly, the Game and Fish Department is raising its voice on the booming energy landscape. Last month, Game and Fish also recommended no winter drilling exceptions be approved this winter because of poor forage available for wildlife.

Tuesday's BLM lease sale generated \$11.8 million, half of which will go to Wyoming. Lease sales ranged from \$2 an acre to \$3,300 per acre. A total of 203,095 acres in 183 parcels were leased, according to the BLM.