

TRAVEL

Drilling Near Dinosaur National Monument Draws Criticism

By STEPHEN NASH OCT. 18, 2017

Changes loom near remote Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. It's a rough region of 1,000-foot cliffs and canyons, two wild rivers — the Green and the Yampa — ancient rock art and archaeological evidence of 10,000 years of human history.

The park, which straddles the Utah-Colorado border, affords visitors backcountry camping, white-water rafting and, most famously, spectacular dinosaur fossils. The Bureau of Land Management has announced that in December it will auction gas and oil drilling rights on 94,000 acres, or 146 square miles, of land, some of it near the park's entrance road.

Pumpjacks, drill rigs and other equipment would be visible from the park's visitor center, which is 2.5 miles from one lease parcel, according to critics. The B.L.M. has said that equipment would not intrude on the average visitor's field of view. The agency said it would take steps to minimize visibility, including light shields, noise mufflers and "placement of exhaust systems to direct noise away from noise sensitive areas" and "avoiding unnecessary flaring of gas."

Ozone pollution from such energy development already exceeds federal Clean Air Act limits in the monument area.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, a Republican who supports fossil fuel development

on public lands, initially said he worried that the new leases would bring eyesores too close to the park. “The state wishes to ensure leasing of these parcels does not impact visual resources or cause light or sound disturbances,” he said in comments submitted to the B.L.M. in July.

The monument’s National Park Service administrators have also expressed concern about dust, night lights, air and water pollution and threats to endangered species. The 330-square-mile, high-desert park is visited by about 300,000 people a year. It was designated a national monument by President Woodrow Wilson in 1915, using powers granted him under the Antiquities Act of 1906.

The new drilling leases pivot away from a policy begun during the administration of Barack Obama, in which the Park Service and the B.L.M. collaborated to avoid visual and environmental impacts from industrial development on public lands near parks. The national monument, administered by the park service, is surrounded by federal public lands administered by the B.L.M. Both agencies are within the Department of the Interior.

More gas and oil drilling is part of the Trump administration’s announced goals of what the president has referred to as “energy dominance.” The Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, has said that “oil and gas production on federal lands is an important source of revenue and job growth in rural America.”

In response to the concerns expressed by Mr. Herbert and others, the B.L.M. has deferred action indefinitely on about 1,600 acres near the park that had been proposed for leases, and said that it will try to mitigate impacts at the monument from drilling activity on the remaining areas near the park.

The governor’s office declared that it was satisfied by the changes.

“Thank you @BLMNational for listening to our concerns about protecting the visitor experience at @DinosaurNPS,” Mr. Herbert said on Twitter.

Others are unhappy. Critics say the shift is emblematic of changes that will affect a wide range of other parks and monuments, as well as those who visit them.

David Nimkin, a senior regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association, said in a statement that the planned energy development “has the

potential to do harm to Dinosaur National Monument. We cannot keep Dinosaur the wild and wonderful place it is if we allow oil rigs on its borders.”

Some of the leases, he said, “are within the direct view of the park’s Quarry Visitor Center and the world famous Carnegie Fossil Quarry. It would also threaten the health of the Colorado River system and could further reduce air quality at Dinosaur, all while adding intensive industrial traffic to the park’s access road.”

Mike Murray, who worked as a national park administrator and ranger for 34 years, cited a range of threats to the parks and the visitor experience. In an interview, he said the decision to auction drilling rights at Dinosaur National Monument was “indefensible,” part of a new wave of “signs and signals” about the administration’s policy intentions. He is a spokesman for a group of park service retirees called the Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks.

Outdoor-related businesses near the national monument expressed a range of concerns in comment letters filed with the B.L.M. Two mountain biking trade associations said that gas and oil drilling “could also put at risk sensitive water resources and threaten other important values such as clean air, wildlife habitat, cultural resources, recreation viewsheds, and the cultural vitality of rural communities.” The National Outdoor Leadership School, which runs training programs in the area, commented that “lease and subsequent development of these parcels will have a serious impact on the river experience. Any new natural gas wells and related infrastructure on this parcel would likely be within view of the river during construction, and within earshot of the river throughout the life of the wells. Such intrusions will doubtless impinge on the river traveler’s experience and degrade the outstanding values provided by the Green River.”

Mr. Murray said the Dinosaur case is only one example of Trump administration decisions that will harm national parks and monuments. In August, the retirees’ group sponsored a letter to the administration, signed by 350 former public employees, including many park administrators. It objected to proposed oil and gas leases on federal land that it says are “adjacent or in proximity” to several other sites: Zion National Park, Capitol Reef National Park, Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Hovenweep National Monument and Fort Laramie National Historic Site.

Interior Department spokeswoman Heather Swift did not respond to several requests for comment. The Vernal, Utah, field office of the B.L.M and the agency's Salt Lake City and Washington, D.C. offices also declined to comment.

The Dinosaur monument's pitch-black night skies and silent soundscapes have been protected by the park service since its creation, Mr. Murray said. He said that visitors will now see "oil rigs instead of a pristine landscape." The risk of toxic industrial spills, leaks and accidents leading to polluted air and water will have arrived along with the energy development opportunity, he added.

"We're incredibly concerned about the direction that the White House is taking with national parks and public lands" in pursuit of energy development and other goals, Kristen Brengel, vice president of government affairs at the National Parks Conservation Association, said in an interview. "We are seeing significant rollbacks of wildlife, drilling, water and conservation policies from prior Republican and Democratic administrations. This is a sea change, and they are taking no prisoners. Even national parks aren't sacred for this administration."

Mr. Zinke recently completed a review requested by Mr. Trump of large national monuments created by his predecessors — Presidents Bush, Clinton and Obama. The resulting recommendations have not yet been officially made public.