



July 14, 2014

Submitted via email to: blm_ut_vernal_comments@blm.gov

Ms. Stephanie Howard
Vernal Field Office
170 South 500 East
Vernal, UT 84078

**RE: Western Energy Alliance Comments, Environmental Assessment, November 2014
Lease Sale, Vernal Field Office**

Dear Ms. Howard;

Western Energy Alliance wishes to express its support for Alternative A, the Proposed Action for the upcoming November 2014 oil and natural gas lease sale. We urge the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to move forward in the process without any further deferrals of nominated parcels.

Western Energy Alliance represents over 480 companies engaged in all aspects of environmentally responsible exploration and production of oil and natural gas in Utah and across the West. Our industry plays an important role in the economic well-being of Utah, and the state's production is a strong contributor toward American energy security. In Utah, oil and natural gas exploration and production supports over 15,000 high paying jobs with wages totaling nearly \$1 billion, an economic impact of over \$3.4 billion, and \$828 million in federal and state taxes. These revenues are used to fund infrastructure, education, and other vital services for communities.

Parcel Deferrals

BLM originally received Expressions of Interest (EOIs) for 90 parcels, of which all or part of 61 were deferred due to BLM's determination of conflict with sage-grouse. The Proposed Action examines only 41 parcels covering 40,319 acres. Western Energy Alliance expresses serious concern regarding BLM's commonplace deferral of such a high proportion of nominated parcels. Our members continue to be harmed by these indeterminate delays and deferrals, and we believe that BLM is not adhering to the approved RMP per BLM Handbook H-1601-1, which establishes that existing land use plan decisions are authoritative until such time as an amendment or revision is finalized.

We have previously contested BLM's decision to pull a large number of parcels in the area from sale immediately prior to auction. In this instance, all or part of 61 of 90 EOIs, fully 68%, were deferred. While nominally done to protect other resources, we wish to point out that oil and natural gas exploration and production is subject to myriad existing restrictions and mitigation and reclamation requirements to ensure the protection of

other natural resources. Resource development can and does take place while protecting other resources on public lands; it is not an “either-or” situation.

Air Quality

As the EA points out on page 31, the act of leasing itself will result in no impacts to air quality. If and when development of the lease takes place, the Utah Division of Air Quality (UDAQ) stringently regulates air emissions per the Clean Air Act (CAA) with strict permitting requirements before development can take place. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has further imposed additional requirements for reducing emissions resulting from oil and natural gas development, including reduced emissions completions technology that captures the great majority of ozone precursors. Industry has made great technological strides in reducing air impacts, and we hold that the requirements mandated through UDAQ and EPA more than adequately address potential air impacts.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)

There are two ACECs addressed within the EA- the Lower Green River Corridor and Nine Mile Canyon ACECs. Among the inventory of parcels analyzed in the EA, there are only six that pose any potential impacts, and each of these carries No Surface Occupancy (NSO) or Controlled Surface Use (CSU) stipulations to protect the resources of the ACEC. With these protections in place, we feel there is no reason BLM should remove the parcels in question from the final sale.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Lower Green River Corridor is currently considered suitable for a Wild and Scenic River designation. Within the EA, there are only four parcels identified that may pose potential impacts to this resource, and as with those potentially impacting the two ACECs, each of these carries strict stipulations, including NSO and light and noise restrictions. Therefore, with these restrictions we believe there is no reason the parcels should not be offered for sale.

Livestock Grazing

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), one of the BLM’s primary guiding statutes, establishes the principle of multiple use, and specifically identifies several major uses of public lands. Both minerals development and livestock grazing are explicitly identified, and both have successfully coexisted on public lands for decades. The oil and natural gas industry respects the validity of other uses of public lands, and when a lease is developed, the project proponent would craft a plan of operations that would address potential impacts to other uses on the land, including grazing, and at that time impacts to rangeland can be specifically addressed to avoid and minimize them.

Recreation

The EA identifies potential conflicts with specific recreational sites, including the Nine Mile Special Recreation Management Area (SMRA), permitted campsites for the wilderness therapy organization Second Nature, and the White River corridor. We wish to point out, as with the ACECs, that only a handful of parcels are identified as having a potential conflict with recreational activities, and that each of these already carry the most restrictive stipulations, including NSO and light and noise restrictions. We therefore feel each of these parcels should be carried forward to auction.

Visual Resources

During oil and natural gas development the most conspicuous activity and equipment occurs and is in place over a relatively short period, after which interim reclamation greatly reduces the initial footprint, remaining production equipment is camouflaged, and traffic to and from the well site is reduced. Because of this, and due to the existing stipulation already in place for the various Visual Resource Management (VRM) classes, we believe that visual impacts are currently effectively addressed, and should not be used to defer any of the remaining parcels in the EA.

Wildlife

The EA identifies three wildlife categories to which potential impacts may occur: migratory birds and raptors; non US Fish and Wildlife Service designated species, particularly Mule Deer and elk; and ESA listed and BLM sensitive species. Both migratory birds and raptors are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), and additional protections, including surveys prior to any surface disturbance, conformance to existing lease stipulations, and adherence to appropriate Best Management Practices (BMP) would take place. Deer and elk crucial winter ranges and fawning/calving habitat all currently carry Controlled Surface Use (CSU) and Timing Limitation (TL) restrictions. ESA listed species require formal consultation prior to any surface disturbing activity, and plans of operation would be tailored accordingly. BLM has implemented several lease stipulations to afford BLM sensitive species additional protections. Due to these protective measures, we believe that potential impacts to wildlife can and will be effectively mitigated, and the full allotment of lease parcels should be allowed to move forward.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

The EA indicates that development may impact acreage that BLM has inventoried as having wilderness characteristics. However, these areas are non-Wilderness Study Areas (WSA), and are classified as “open to leasing”. In any case, resource development is a small and temporary impact, and Western Energy Alliance objects to any notion that oil and natural gas development results in the irretrievable loss of primitive landscapes. Noise and sight mitigation techniques are effective at obscuring development processes

while resource development is taking place, and reclamation practices have been effective to the point that areas with historic resource development have subsequently been proposed for Wilderness designation. Resource development and landscape protection are not mutually exclusive goals.

Conclusion

Oil and natural gas production has played a historically significant role in the culture and economic livelihood of the State of Utah, and it has been one of the few bright spots in an otherwise moribund economy. Domestic production, predominantly on state and private lands, has allowed the United States to recently claim the mantle as the world's top producer of oil, and America leads the world in natural gas production. Production from public lands has historically been an important part of the equation, and to meet the nation's energy needs and to continue to reduce our reliance on foreign sources it must continue to be so into the future. We urge BLM to move forward with the sale of the remaining acreage with no further deferrals. We appreciate the opportunity to comment. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Kathleen M. Sgamma
Vice President of Government and Public Affairs

- Cc: The Honorable Gary Herbert, Governor, State of Utah
The Honorable Orrin Hatch, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Mike Lee, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Rob Bishop, U.S. House of Representatives
Duchesne County Commission
Uintah County Commission