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AGENCIES ALLOW OIL AND GAS LEASING OF ROADLESS AREAS DESPITE POLICY PREVENTING NEW ROADS

*Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management violating the Interim Directives of the Forest Service's
Roadless Rule by offering lease sale*

Paonia, Colorado— On November 8, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management gave the green light to oil and gas leasing on approximately 21,000 acres in two key roadless areas on the Gunnison National Forest in western Colorado. The parcels were leased despite formal protests filed by local and national conservation groups, and in violation of the Forest Service's own roadless area policy. The decision to allow leasing of the roadless lands all but eliminates the agency's authority to prevent new road construction and location of drilling rigs within the roadless area.

The conservation groups, the Western Slope Environmental Resource Council, High Country Citizens' Alliance and the Wilderness Society, represented by the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, lodged a lease protest with the BLM and filed an objection letter with the Forest Service. They charged that the Forest Service violated its own policy on roadless area protection by not requesting environmental review of the leasing proposals before making the areas available for bidding.

"Roadless area protection is a top priority for our members," said Jeremy Puckett of the Paonia-based Western Slope Environmental Resource Council. "These lands provide important wildlife habitat, winter range and riparian corridors. Creeks that flow through these areas provide clean water to irrigate nearby orchards, farms and ranches. We believe that potential impacts to roadless character from oil and gas leasing should be analyzed *before* leasing occurs, not after. In our experience, we've seen that mineral extraction and road building go hand in hand."

The areas that have been opened to leasing and road construction are known as the Springhouse Park and Priest Mountain Roadless Areas. They are located several miles north of Paonia on the eastern flank of Grand Mesa, the largest flat-top mountain in the country. Grand Mesa is well-known for its abundant aspen stands and is a popular destination for forest visitors who use its trails for hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, ATV travel, and fishing its many lakes. Springhouse Park gets a lot of hunting use in the fall and Priest Mountain is one of the largest, most intact roadless areas left on the Gunnison National Forest.

The Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation Rule would have protected these roadless areas from road construction and industrial development. A record-setting 1.6 million American citizens commented on the Roadless Rule, including more than 28,000 Coloradans. Roughly 95 percent of all letters and better than 90% of Colorado comments favored prohibitions on road building in the last remaining wildlands on America's national forests. After the rule was stayed by a federal judge in Idaho, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth issued Interim Directives assuring the public that areas protected by the Rule would not be opened to development unless the Chief specifically reviewed and approved a development proposal.

"Leasing is an end run around the Roadless Rule and the Chief's guarantee that he would personally review any projects that result in new road construction in protected areas," said Mike Chiropolos, Staff Attorney with the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies.

"The Forest Service is well aware that the cat is out of the bag once the areas have been leased without prohibitions on roads and wells," Chiropolos continued. "The time for the Forest Service to assure protection of roadless values is before leasing. And its only fair to potential lessees to be notified of development restrictions before they bid on a lease, rather than try to impose additional costs and restrictions after the bid."

The conservation groups joined together to send a letter to the Forest Service and a formal lease protest to the BLM objecting to the sales. The letters stated that, if the agencies allowed leasing to proceed, they are required to protect the roadless lands with "No Surface Occupancy" provisions that would prohibit roads and drill rigs within the roadless area, but would allow leasing companies to access any minerals by directional drilling from outside the roadless area boundaries. No Surface Occupancy provisions are a commonly accepted method of balancing competing concerns of protecting wildlands while not making lands off-limits to mineral development.

The groups contacted the Forest Service before the November 8 lease sale in the hopes that the agency would withdraw the roadless lands from leasing, delay leasing to allow public comment, or impose No Surface Occupancy provisions. Their request fell on deaf ears. The Forest Service answered that leasing in and of itself does not directly result in new road construction.

"In light of recent events, people are re-evaluating what is important in life," said Sandy Shea of the High Country Citizens' Alliance in Crested Butte. "Here on the West Slope, HCCA and WSERC stand for protecting wildlands and wildlife habitat, which are key to the long-term health of our rural economy and our quality of life. We're angry that the public did not have an opportunity to comment on a leasing proposal in a roadless area. Once again, it looks like the Forest Service is ignoring the enormous popular support for roadless area protection."

For a copy of the groups' letter, contact Mike Chiropolos at (303) 444-1188 x217, or visit <http://www.lawfund.org/pressrelease.htm>.

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