

# Lawsuit aims to block oil drilling on US land in Nevada

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In this Dec. 9, 2014 file photo, anti-fracking protesters rally outside the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Reno, Nev., during the auction of oil and gas leases for energy exploration that critics say poses a threat to fish, wildlife and groundwater. Environmentalists filed an anti-fracking lawsuit in Nevada to block an effort to expand oil and gas drilling on federal land. Two national conservation groups say the Bureau of Land Management is reversing course from policies it enacted in the final weeks of the Obama administration. (AP Photo/Scott Sonner, File)

Environmentalists have sued a U.S. agency to try to stop it from allowing oil and gas drilling on a vast stretch of federal land in Nevada, where the government is reversing protections put in place nine months ago under the Obama administration.

The Sierra Club and Center for Biological Diversity say the U.S. Bureau of Land Management illegally failed to consider potential consequences of hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking, ranging from harm to the greater sage grouse to contamination of fragile desert water sources and emission of climate-altering greenhouse gases.

The suit filed last week in federal court in Reno seeks an order forcing the bureau to rescind oil drilling leases it sold in June for as low as \$2 per acre on three land parcels covering about 9 square miles (23 square kilometers).

The groups are asking a judge to forbid permits on an additional 103 parcels totaling 296 square miles (767 square kilometers) until the agency complies with the National Environmental Policy Act and other laws they say require a thorough examination of the potential effects of fracking.

"The Trump administration wants to turn public lands into private profits for the fossil fuel industry at the peril of local communities and wildlife," said Clare Lakewood, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute in Oakland, California.

President Donald Trump has taken other steps to open up federal lands to energy production, including proposals to eliminate national monuments designated by former President Barack Obama.

Patrick Donnelley, the center's state director in Nevada, said the drilling leases in Nevada mark the first time the Trump administration has

reversed a draft proposal by the previous administration to keep some otherwise unprotected lands off limits to drilling. He says the government is flouting environmental rules "to push their oil and gas agenda."

Fracking has led to a boom in natural gas production but raised widespread concerns about possible groundwater contamination and even earthquakes. The method uses huge amounts of pressurized water, sand and chemicals to extract oil and natural gas from rock formations deep underground.



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conservation groups say the Bureau of Land Management is reversing course from policies it enacted in the final weeks of the Obama administration. (AP Photo/Scott Sonner, File)

The lawsuit says it can release carcinogens and other hazardous pollutants into the air and water while emitting massive amounts of methane, a significant driver of climate change.

Bureau of Land Management spokesman Steve Clutter said the agency does not comment on pending litigation. But he said federal law directs the agency to conduct quarterly sales of drilling leases for minerals beneath about 880,000 square miles (2.2 million square kilometers) of land that it manages—an area eight times the size of Nevada.

He said domestic production of oil and gas on those lands account for about 10 percent of the nation's gas supply and 5 percent of its oil.

The federal mineral leases don't automatically allow companies to drill but provide a 10-year window to apply for permits for gas and oil exploration.

The land bureau acknowledged when issuing a 280-page draft environmental assessment of the 106 parcels in January that use of the drilling practice was a "real possibility" but maintains it does not have to examine site-specific effects until a developer submits a formal plan to pursue such a tactic.

Such an analysis "would amount to speculation," agency Acting State Director Marcia Todd said in denying the environmentalists' protest of the lease sales in June.

Only about 20 fracking permits have ever been issued in Nevada and only seven wells have been drilled—five of those in 2014 and one most recently last year, said Richard Perry, administrator of the Nevada Division of Minerals Commission on Mineral Resources.

He testified before a legislative panel in February that there had been "no safety or environmental incidents."

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