

# Lawsuit contends energy lease sales will affect environment

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke testifies at a Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing on the FY19 budget, Thursday, May 10, 2018, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Environmental groups and three Montana landowners sued Tuesday to cancel hundreds of recent oil and gas lease sales, saying the U.S. government's leasing of public lands is skyrocketing without understanding how all that drilling will affect water quality and climate

change.

WildEarth Guardians, Montana Environmental Information Center and the three landowners filed their lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Great Falls over the 287 leases sold in December and March that cover nearly 234 square miles (606 square kilometers) across central and eastern Montana.

Those leases and others the U.S. government has sold and plans to sell in Montana, North Dakota, Colorado, Wyoming and other western states together "will have significant cumulative environmental impacts," according to the lawsuit.

The environmental organizations said the U.S. Bureau of Land Management within the Interior Department has sold energy leases on [public lands](#) nationwide this year totaling more than 1,562 square miles (4,045 square kilometers), which is nearly double last year's pace of lease sales.

"The American West is currently under attack from corporate oil and gas interests set on committing us to another 40 years of dirty fossil fuels," said Becca Fischer of WildEarth Guardians. "We need to take action now to protect our climate and keep federal fossil fuels in the ground."

BLM spokesman Al Nash said the agency does not comment on pending litigation.

The lease sales challenged in the lawsuit includes land adjacent to the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in northern Montana, which Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke spared last year after his agency's review of national monuments. Other leased land include parcels near the Beartooth Mountains and the town of Livingston in the south and the along the Tongue River Valley in the southeast near the Wyoming state

line.

The environmentalists and landowners claim the BLM failed to properly study oil and gas drilling's effects on groundwater sources when it conducted an environmental analysis of leasing the lands. They also claim the agency did not address how drilling on those lands would affect the release of greenhouse gases and climate change, which is required by federal law.

The landowners named in the [lawsuit](#) are Bonnie and Jack Martinell, who own a farm in eastern Montana's Carbon County, and David Katz, who owns property on the Beartooth Front in Stillwater County.

The landowners said in statements they are worried about contamination to their wells and streams, plus potential damage caused by hauling equipment to drill on the leased land.

The same Montana lease sales are also being challenged in lawsuits filed last month that claim the land contains crucial habitat for the greater sage grouse, a chicken-sized bird whose populations have declined in recent decades. Those lawsuits challenge not only the Montana leases, but oil and gas [lease](#) sales in Wyoming, Utah and Colorado for a total of 1,300 square miles (3,400 [square](#) kilometers).

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