

Report: Bush admin's gas leases too close to parks

12 June 2009, By PAUL FOY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Bush administration officials pushed aside the National Park Service and sought to lease public lands for drilling on the borders of Utah's most famous redrock parks during their final days in power, a special report to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar says.

Salazar was condemned by the [oil industry](#) for scrapping 77 of the leases weeks after taking office, but all of the drilling parcels had already been delayed by a federal lawsuit that still hasn't been resolved.

Salazar defended his decision in a telephone interview Thursday, saying that leasing parcels on or near borders of national parks is highly unusual.

"At the end of the day, the Bush administration attempted to get as much public land leased for oil and gas development as they possibly could," Salazar said. "That kind of rush to a result short-circuited processes that are in place to protect our most precious landscapes."

Two retired high-ranking officials of the Bureau of Land Management said they were making available the land on which industry wanted to drill, and that the parcels close to national parks would have been encumbered with limits on noise, lighting and hours of drilling operation.

"I do agree that you should not drill willy-nilly. But on the other hand, if there is opportunity for domestic energy supplies to be expanded, you cannot just walk away," said retired BLM director James L. Caswell of Emmett, Idaho.

Salazar's actions provoked a political battle that held up the Senate's confirmation of his chief deputy, David Hayes, who wrote the report and found serious flaws in the awarding of oil and gas leases on a visit to Utah.

Hayes said the BLM - the agency responsible for

leasing public lands for energy development - set out to lease drilling parcels on the borders of Arches National Park without notifying the Park Service, violating a long-standing pact.

The BLM also moved to lease other parcels close to Canyonlands National Park and Dinosaur National Monument, and to open drilling around artifact-rich Nine Mile Canyon and along the high cliffs of whitewater sections of the wild Green River.

Cordell Roy, the chief Park Service administrator in Utah, said the BLM didn't consult the agency on an initial auction list that included parcels near the parks and monument.

"I was shocked and disappointed. I was really surprised by that," Roy said.

On all previous lease sales, the BLM would notify the Park Service ahead of the public and would send computer mapping files for Park Service officials to review, Roy said. The notifications would come "like clockwork," he said.

The BLM backed off under pressure from the Park Service and removed parcels from the December auction list. But Hayes' report found it still auctioned 47 lease parcels that were too close to Arches and Canyonlands parks or wild areas without regard for spoiling views or fouling the air with drilling emissions.

"Only when the light of public scrutiny was shed on the situation did they reconsider some of the most problematic leases," Salazar said.

Hayes said the remaining 30 leases that Salazar rescinded in February could go up for sale again because they are in or next to existing oil and gas fields, but only after each parcel is carefully studied.

"We're creating a SWAT team, basically, to look at parcels on an individual basis," Hayes said. ---

Salazar said he agreed with that recommendation.

"There are some parcels that appear to be appropriate for leasing, and some that are not appropriate," he said.

BLM critics said the agency's political appointees under the Bush administration - some still in their jobs - should be held to account for the leasing decisions.

Selma Sierra, Utah's BLM state director said at the outset of the controversy that she didn't see anything wrong with drilling next to national parks.

"I'm puzzled the Park Service has been as upset as they are," Sierra said in November. "There are already many parcels leased around the parks. It's not like they've never been leased. I don't see it as something we are doing to undermine the Park Service."

Sierra declined to comment through office assistants on Thursday.

"The person who steers the ship in Utah is Selma Sierra. It couldn't have happened without her," Heidi McIntosh, a staff lawyer for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, said Thursday. "The report expresses extreme displeasure with the people who ran the show."

Bob Anderson, the BLM's deputy assistant director in Washington for minerals until he retired two weeks ago, defended the process that led to the offer of drilling near national parks.

"We can't move those oil deposits. They're there, and we should be using good sense using the resource," said Anderson, of Centerville, Va.

"A lot of this stuff is subjective," Anderson said about decisions to lease public land. "It depends on how you look at it. We are a multiple-use agency. Energy is scarce. We took great care offering parcels."

On the Net:

Hayes' report: <http://www.doi.gov/utahreport/>

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