



"No harm, no foul" doesn't exist in oil and gas leasing



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Even when speculative oil and gas leases aren't drilled they still negatively impact wildlife, wild lands, and recreation opportunities

**Center for Western Priorities, Wilderness Workshop, & Colorado Wildlands Project
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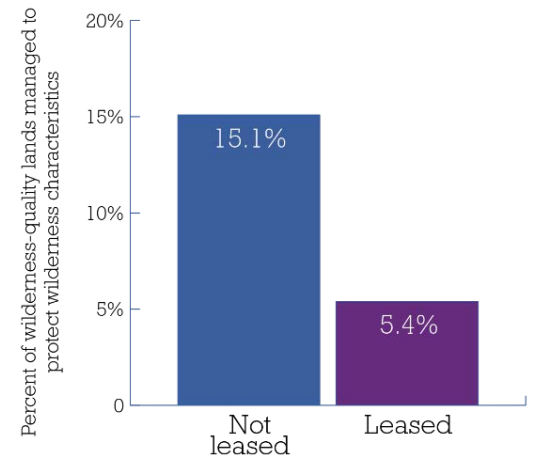
No harm, no foul?

Across the West, huge swaths of public lands are open to oil and gas leasing in "resource management plans" (RMPs) prepared by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This

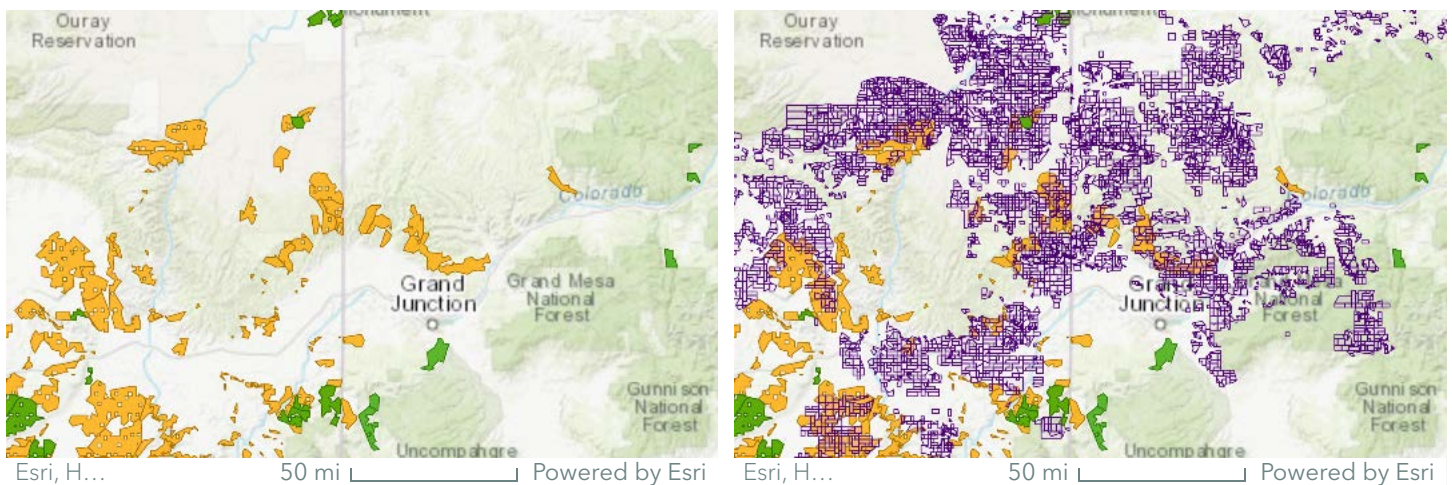
leads to rampant speculation in public lands that are supposed to be managed for the benefit of all Americans, not just the oil and gas executives.

While the industry claims that undrilled leases have no negative impacts on other uses of the public lands, a new analysis finds that **wilderness-quality lands are nearly 3 TIMES less likely to be managed to protect those characteristics if they are overlapped by oil and gas leases—even if those leases are purely speculative and are not being drilled**—demonstrating an immediate need to overhaul the BLM's industry-friendly oil and gas leasing system.

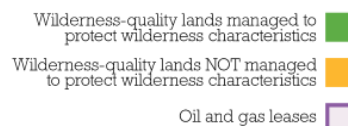
Wilderness-quality lands are nearly **THREE TIMES** less likely to be managed to protect wilderness characteristics if they are overlapped by oil and gas leases

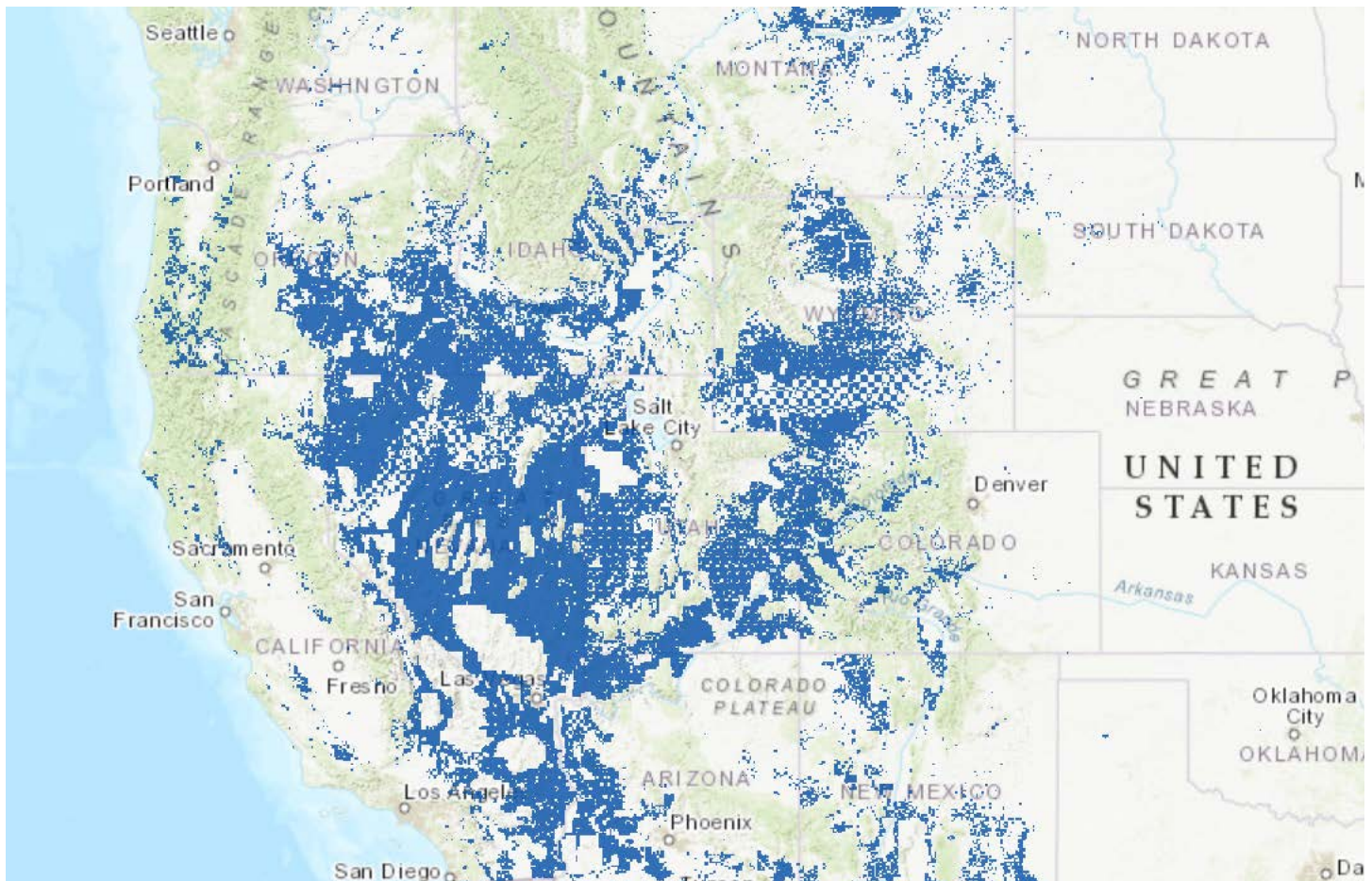


View **the case studies in the navigation bar** to see why this matters to specific places around the West.



Use the slider to see oil and gas leases across the landscape





Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA | Source: Esri, BLM, DoD, NP...

200 mi | Powered by Esri

The BLM manages 10% of the United States' landmass and 30% of the nation's minerals, primarily in the Western United States. Although the BLM's mission is to "sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations," the agency's outdated leasing and drilling policies are skewed in favor of corporate oil and gas interests. This allows companies to lock up millions of acres in idle leases, which, as our analysis shows, are then not managed for the use and enjoyment of the American public.

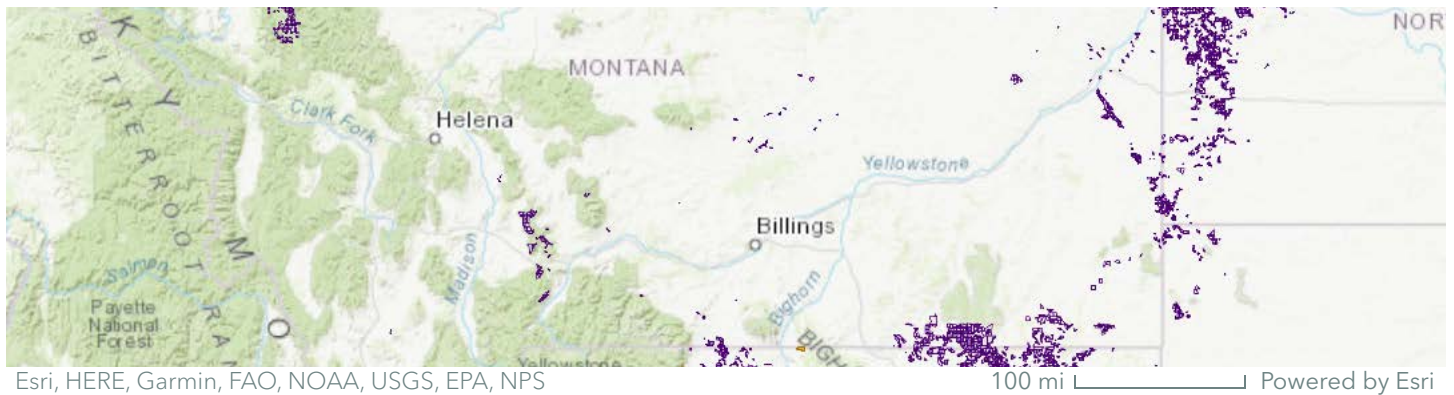
Bureau of Land Management



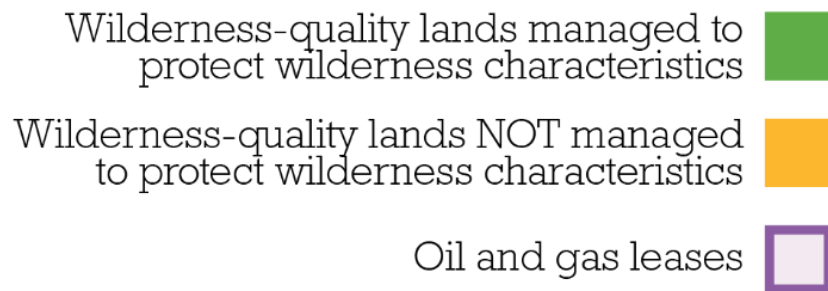
America's Public Lands Giveaway



A key problem with this system is that the BLM defaults to managing public land for oil and gas development, with over 90% of BLM lands open to leasing. As a result, sensitive landscapes with valuable ecosystems, wildlife habitat, wilderness characteristics, cultural values, and other uses are frequently leased for drilling, even when those landscapes have very little potential for future drilling.



Over the past decades, the oil and gas industry has acquired leases on millions of acres through this rigged system, many of which are left idle. Industry likes to say that these idle leases (nearly 50% of all leases in the West) are a “no harm, no foul” situation—because lands, wildlife, and other values are only impacted if drilling actually takes place. However, our analysis shows that’s far from the case, as leased landscapes—lands with wilderness characteristics in particular—are frequently left unprotected in BLM RMPs, making the unnecessarily-extensive 9.9 million acres of idle leases in the West a management liability and a misuse of public lands.





We analyzed RMPs from multiple states and presidential administrations to determine whether and to what extent existing leases affected decisions to protect wilderness-quality lands known as lands with wilderness characteristics (LWCs).

Read more about what LWCs are by navigating to the right.



“Lands with wilderness characteristics,” or LWCs, are public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management that have specific wilderness qualities. These areas are at least 5,000 acres in size, are in a natural state, and provide outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation or solitude. Because of these wilderness qualities, lands with wilderness characteristics often have additional values such as important wildlife habitat, water resources and cultural histories.

posed actions are implemented. These also included as part of this Record of Decision.

Implementation of the RMP will require some additional planning and environmental analyses. Prior to authorizing site specific actions (habitat improvement projects, mining, mineral development, etc.), the appropriate level of additional environmental analysis will be performed and documented in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), Department of the Interior and BLM manuals.

Alternatives Considered

Four alternatives were analyzed in the draft RMP and EIS. These were: 1) No Action/Continuation of Present Management; 2) Custodial Management; 3) Natural Resource Enhancement; and 4) the

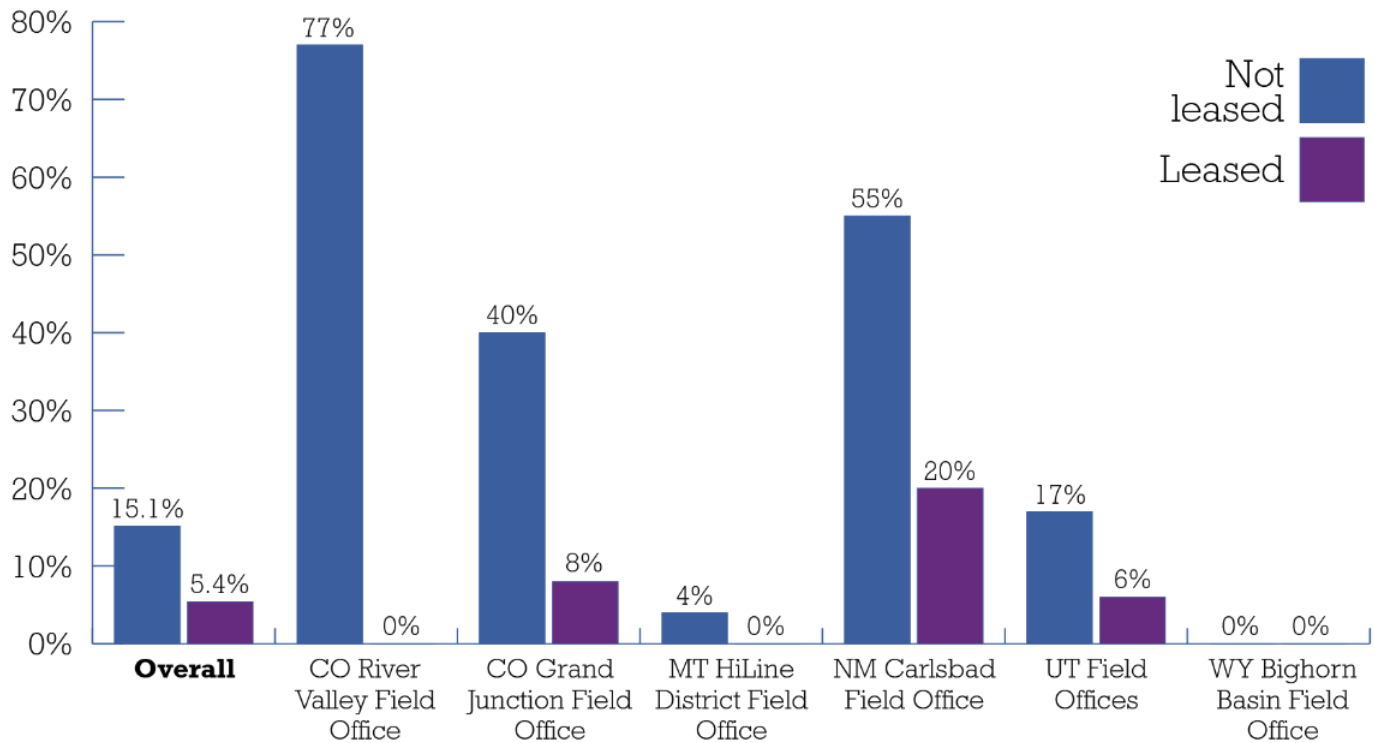
that allows continued commodity production and increased response to local community needs, yet provides for better protection of the environment than did the preferred alternative in the draft.

Management Considerations

The BLM has the responsibility to manage public lands and resources to provide for a variety of uses. Through the RMP process, the BLM and the public have painted a picture of the resource conditions and activities they desire to see on these lands. Decisions in the RMP are designed to enhance our ability to achieve this picture. Many of the decisions provide guidelines and standards which all activities will follow so the picture can become reality. Because of overwhelming public desire, we placed an emphasis on environmental values in the final RMP decisions.

Unlike in designated Wilderness, the BLM is not required to preserve wilderness values in such areas. Rather, the decision to protect and manage the land for these characteristics rests with the BLM's resource management planning process. The decision to protectively manage lands with wilderness characteristics often involves closures to oil and gas leasing or stipulations on development; restrictions on new rights-of-way such as transmission lines; prohibitions on construction of new permanent roads; and limitations on the use of motorized vehicles or mechanized equipment.

Wilderness-quality lands managed to protect wilderness characteristics



Across all planning areas analyzed, only 5% of LWCs leased for oil and gas drilling were managed to protect those wilderness characteristics, while 15% of un-leased LWCs were managed to protect the same characteristics. **In other words, these valuable landscapes were nearly 3 times less likely to be protected if leased.**

There is also extensive evidence in BLM RMPs to support this data. In these RMPs, the BLM has specifically cited the presence of leases on-the-ground as the rationale for not protecting LWCs.



Below, explore a series of case studies demonstrating the impact that oil and gas leases—even when not developed—can have on wildlife, wild lands, and recreation resources in the Western United States, and what that means for specific landscapes and communities.

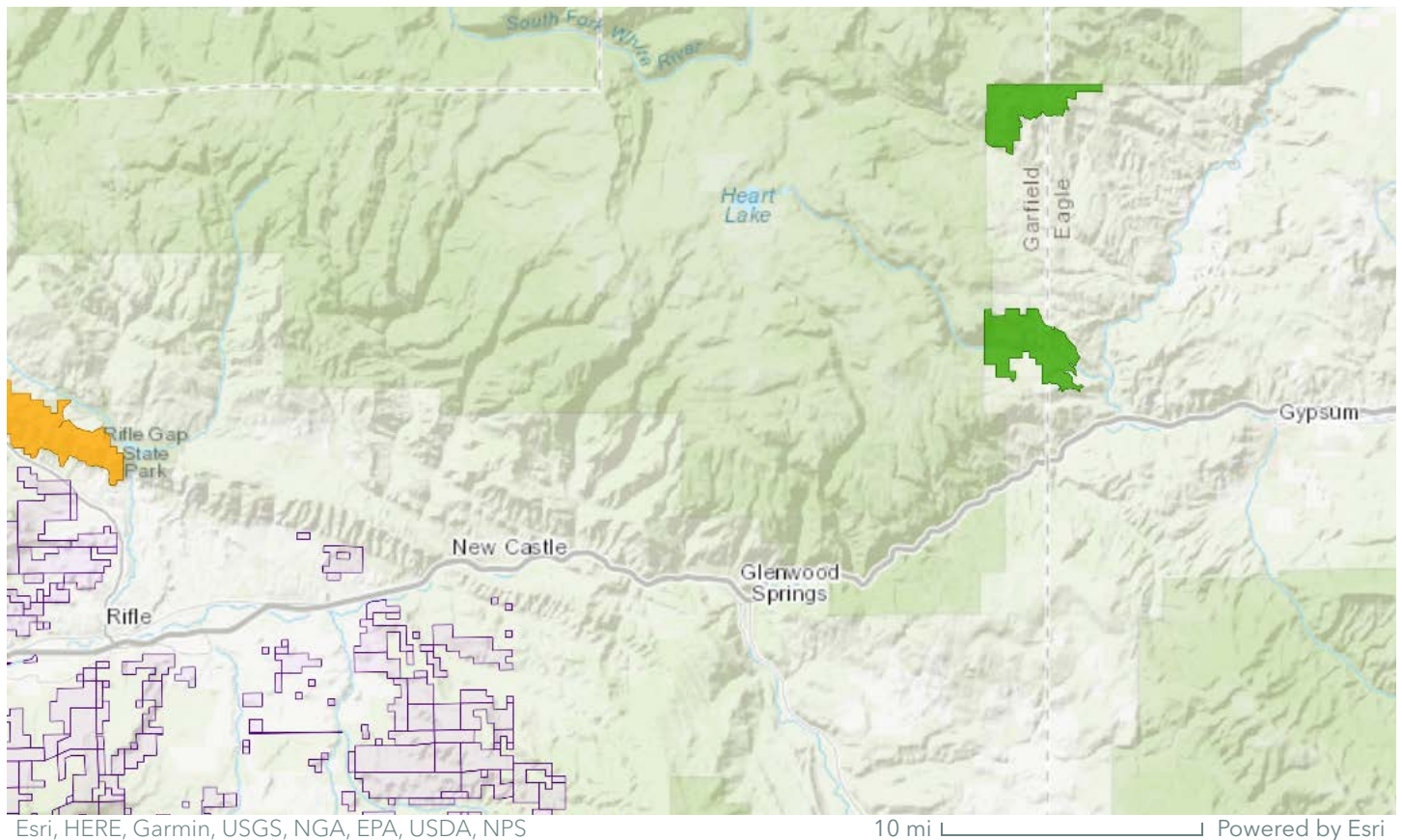


Case Studies

Grand Hogback: Rifle, Colorado

The Grand Hogback is a ridge that abuts the popular Rifle Gap State Park, near Rifle, CO, and is one of the best examples of undrilled leases undermining protections for wilderness characteristics.

The section of the ridge adjacent to the state park has been identified by the BLM as an area with wilderness characteristics, meaning that it has outstanding opportunities for solitude and recreation. However, in the governing RMP, the BLM decided not to protect its wilderness characteristics due to inactive oil and gas leases.



The Grand Hogback is the only LWC within the Colorado River Valley Field Office region not to be managed for protection of its wilderness characteristics, and also the only unit overlapped by oil and gas leases.

- Wilderness-quality lands managed to protect wilderness characteristics
- Wilderness-quality lands NOT managed to protect wilderness characteristics
- Oil and gas leases

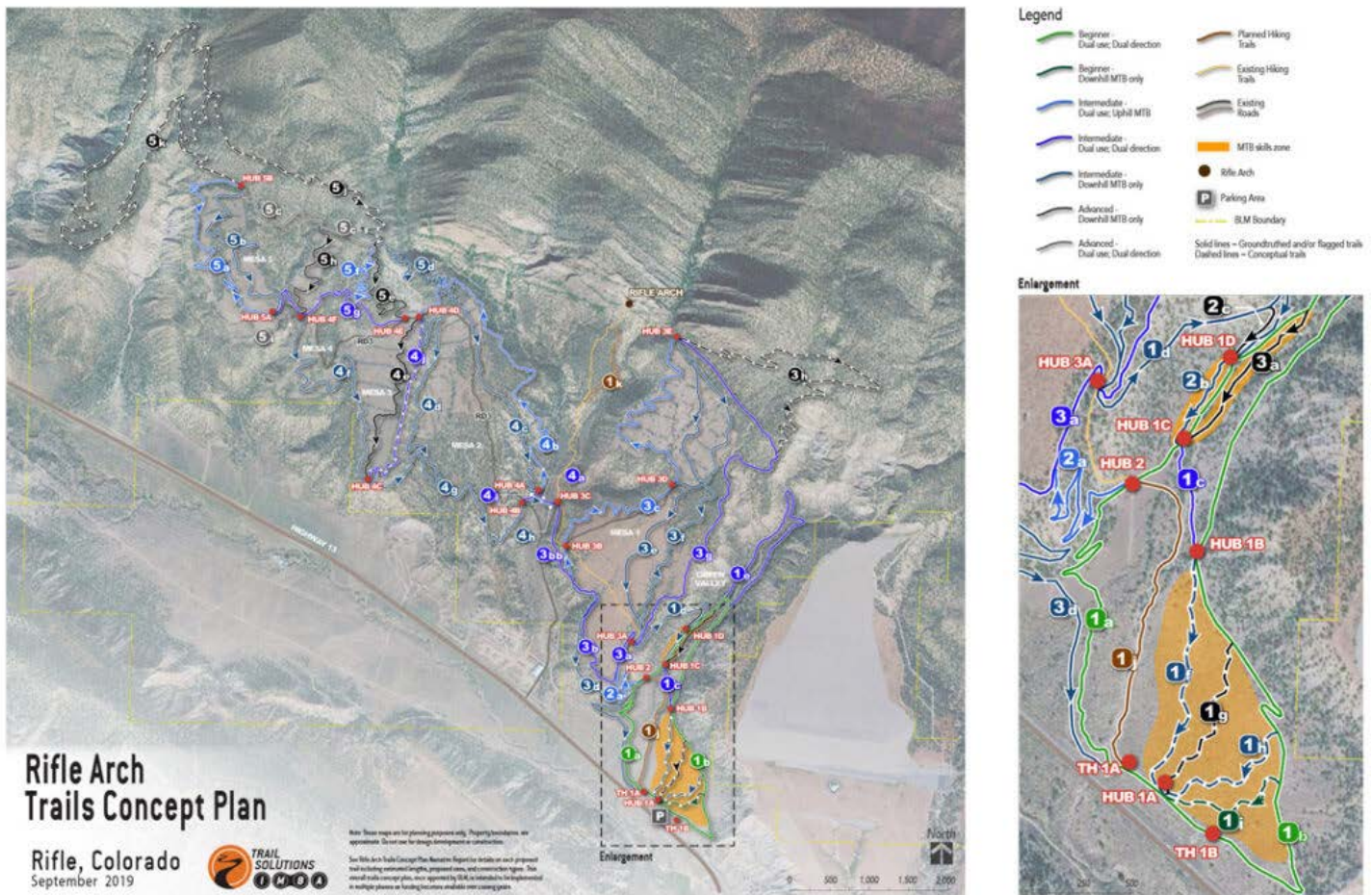
Resource management planning documents note that there are, “...active oil and gas leases within the [wilderness inventory] unit, totaling approximately 2,240 acres. None of these leases shows any active drilling or has previously drilled wells. The ability to manage for wilderness characteristics in the unit would be difficult.”



AARON MATTIX
OWNER OF GUMPTION TRAIL WORKS

At the same time, the area is the focus of a local effort to bolster the outdoor recreation economy, namely through the creation of the Grand Hogback Mountain Biking Trail System. In nearby Grand Junction and Fruita, the popularity of mountain biking has fueled booming outdoor recreation economies and income for local communities.

[Learn more about the project](#)



Construction on the Grand Hogback (or "Rifle Arch") Trail System began in 2020. When fully completed, the system will be over 18 miles long and will serve riders of all abilities. It will also represent a meaningful investment of time and money by the local community.



Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, NGA, EPA, USDA, NPS


10 mi Powered by Esri

Oil and gas development would lay waste to this opportunity and investment—mountain biking through a gas field isn't a desirable recreation experience! Yet the BLM has made a long-term decision to leave the Grand Hogback open to oil and gas leasing and development, prioritizing extraction over recreation.

The agency made this decision based on the existence of inactive oil and gas leases, showing the real harm that occurs from undrilled leases.

Wilderness-quality lands managed to protect wilderness characteristics 

Wilderness-quality lands NOT managed to protect wilderness characteristics 

Oil and gas leases 



On the Grand Hogback, unused oil and gas leases held by oil and gas companies are undermining the management of land for the benefit of wildlife and the local community, putting a special place—and a magnet for a future outdoor recreation boom—at risk.



Book Cliffs & Nine Mile Canyon, Utah

In Utah, between the towns of Helper and Green River, lays a landscape called the Book Cliffs, which is rich with high-priority wildlife habitat and cultural resources. However, oil and gas leases in the area (many of which are inactive) have prevented it from being granted higher management protections.



Within the area of the Book Cliffs are the Nine Mile Canyon and Lower Green River, both of which the BLM has acknowledged for their high value by classifying them as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs).

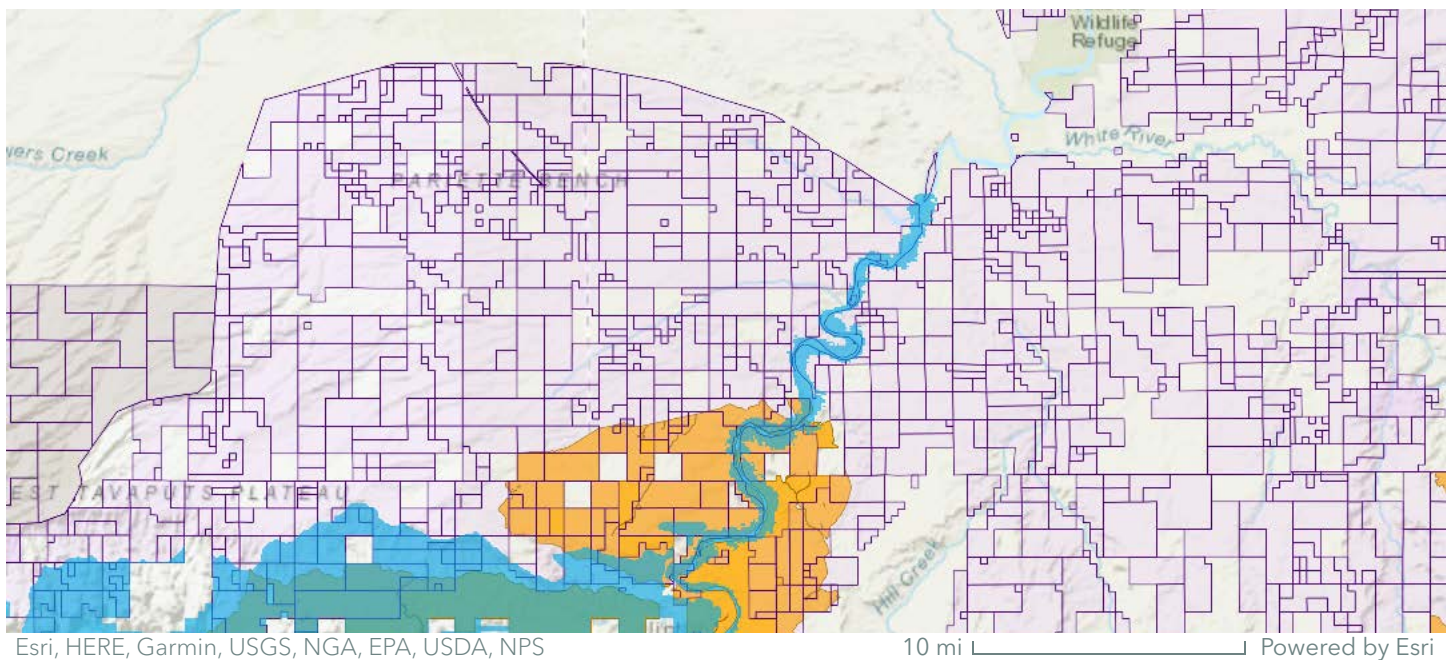
Nine Mile Canyon &
Lower Green River ACECs



Nine Mile Canyon (actually 46 miles long) is often described as **“the world’s longest art gallery”** and is home to the richest concentration of historic and prehistoric rock art anywhere in the United States. More than 100 sites in the canyon are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and hundreds more have been documented.



Meanwhile, the Lower Green River ACEC provides spring spawning habitat for endangered fish species and high-value yearlong habitat for pronghorn, mule deer, and Desert bighorn sheep. It is also an important migratory corridor for waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and neotropical migratory birds.



Although an area including both the Nine Mile Canyon and parts of the Lower Green River was identified as having high-value wilderness characteristics, the BLM **declined** to manage the area for these values, which would have given the landscape additional protections.

- Wilderness-quality lands managed to protect wilderness characteristics
- Wilderness-quality lands NOT managed to protect wilderness characteristics
- Oil and gas leases
- Nine Mile Canyon & Lower Green River ACECs



When providing an explanation for why this area—and all 9 others in the field office region—were not selected for management of wilderness characteristics, the BLM wrote that, “Those areas were not selected because they are considered to have high potential for oil and gas resources *and currently have a large portion of the lands leased.*”
[emphasis added]

What now?

Policy recommendations for better management

It is clear that rampant oil and gas leasing of our public lands has a negative impact on wildlife, wild lands, and recreation opportunities, even when leases are not developed. In the case of idle leases, taxpayers receive almost zero benefit while other important values of leased lands are less likely to be

protected and proactively managed to enhance their use by wildlife, recreationalists, or other users.

There are a number of ways in which the oil and gas leasing system could be improved to prevent these problems. Firstly, the default presumption that all lands should be left open to leasing should be eliminated. Public lands shouldn't automatically be available for leasing without equal consideration for other potentially higher values, such as lands with wilderness characteristics.

Additionally, the BLM shouldn't let existing leases influence management decisions. The presence of leases in an area shouldn't be a reason not to protect lands with wilderness characteristics, as leaseholders still have the ability to develop valid existing rights regardless of subsequent management decisions such as LWC protection. The BLM should issue policy guidance directing field managers to not consider undeveloped leases when making long-term resource management decisions.

Lastly, the BLM should defer leasing in lands with wilderness characteristics that do not have management decisions in place so that the agency has ample decision space to protectively manage these valuable areas for their conservation and recreation resources. The BLM should not extend leases in lands with wilderness characteristics but instead return leased lands to multiple use management at the end of the lease terms.

In its recently released report, DOI noted that, "when land is under contract for potential oil and gas activity, the shared public lands cannot be managed for other purposes." The Interior Department therefore can and should implement the aforementioned changes through its ongoing effort to reform the federal oil and gas program. Doing so would help eliminate speculative leasing and would be a significant step

towards ensuring the BLM's mission of sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

More about public lands leasing

