

BLM: Federal oil and gas land sales continue despite COVID-19 health crisis

Federal public land in southeast New Mexico continued to be offered to the oil and gas industry for drilling and other extraction activities as environmentalists questioned the fairness of such sales during the COVID-19 pandemic and unprecedented decline in oil prices.

The federal Bureau of Land Management announced a public scoping period from July 20 to 31 for its January 14, 2021 lease sale, intended to gather broad comments on the location and potential environmental impacts to the region from oil and gas operations.

The sale included six parcels in Eddy County, 26 in Lea County and one in Wise County, Texas.

In total, 33 parcels on 6,442 acres was initially planned to be offered.

An environmental analysis would be completed following the scoping comments, with another public comment period on that document planned from Sept. 14 to 25.

A final protest period was scheduled from Nov. 9 to Nov. 19.

The announcement came a week after the BLM released an **environmental assessment** for another lease sale scheduled for Oct. 28 and 29 later this year.

That sale offered 7,703 acres of public land for lease by the oil and gas industry in Eddy, Lea and Chaves counties.

Public comments were to be accepted on the environmental assessment (EA) from July 6 to July 17, with the protest period from Aug. 24 to Sept. 2.

BLM finds 'minimal' impact from more wells in southeast New Mexico

In its EA, the BLM found “no significant impact” from the sale and oil and gas operations on the land proposed for development, and determined that further analysis through an environmental impact statement (EIS) was needed.

Future development on the land was expected to result in 16 horizontal wells and about 72 acres of surface disturbance, read the EA, with a total predicted production of about 2.7 million barrels of crude oil and 15.7 billion cubic feet of natural gas.

In justifying its finding the activity posed low impacts to the surrounding region, the BLM's EA pointed to “extensive” oil and gas operations already taking place in the region and its importance to the local economy.

“Within these counties, as well as the area immediately surrounding the nominated parcels, there already exists extensive oil and gas development and production,” read the EA. “Oil and gas development and its attendant industry are identifying components of the economic and social fabric of the region.”

The report admitted that the total emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) would add to ozone levels in the region that already exceeded the National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS), but argued it was unlikely all 16 wells would be developed in the same year thus would not have an immediate, cumulative impact.

The EA also argued the developments would be spread out enough to not have much impact on their immediate surrounding areas.

The parcels nominated also did not contain any residences, thus would not have an impact on residential air quality, read the report.

The combined construction and operation of each well combined would result in about a third of a ton of hazardous air pollutants (HAP), or about 5 tons for all the parcels combined.

The BLM considers a major HAP emission source to be one that emits 10 tons per year.

The EA also reported that the project would generate less than 1 percent of the U.S.' current greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Water usage was considered minimal by the project, read the report, at about 499 acre feet for drilling and completion and another 25 acre feet per year for operations.

While the leases when operated could result in industrial accidents and spills, the report read, such activities are already common in the area and the 16 additional parcels would not mark a major increase in the potential for hazards.

The 16 wells accounted for about .03 percent of about 57,000 in the New Mexico side of the Permian Basin.

The dense oil and gas operations already present in the region were used to justify the finding that the 16 wells analyzed in the EA would also not significantly increase the impact on the geology, ground water or human environment.

“Leasing for oil and gas, and subsequent exploration and development, is a regular and ongoing activity in the region,” the report read.

“Oil and gas exploration and development is a common practice in Eddy, Lea, and Chaves Counties, New Mexico,” the report read. “The nature of these activities and the resulting potential impacts have been analyzed, making use of the best-available scientific data.”

Environmental groups seek to stop lease sales in New Mexico

But environmentalists questioned the BLM’s actions to continue leasing land for extraction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opponents of the sales argued that more oil and gas operations only exacerbated the health concerns brought on by COVID-19 and argued the lack of fuel demand created by the health crisis and subsequent travel restriction led to shrinking oil prices and less revenue for tax payers from subsequent development.

Environmental groups filed multiple lawsuits seeking to block lease sales throughout New Mexico.

The BLM’s May lease sale was postpone, with the parcels to be offered during the August lease. The only BLM lease sale of 2020 as of July was held in February, about a month before COVID-19 was detected in the U.S.

“The Bureau of Land Management is exploiting the COVID-19 chaos, trying to turn the public health crisis into a payday for polluters,” said Rebecca Sobel, senior climate and energy campaigner for WildEarth Guardians.

“Communities need clean air and water more than ever during a respiratory pandemic. The administration must be held accountable for sacrificing public health to protect the oil and gas industry, whose actions only exacerbate the crisis.”

Ally Beasley at the Western Environmental Law Center said the BLM was using the pandemic limit public participation in the lease sales, while worsening the impacts on climate change.

“This sacrifices public health and enables oil and gas development in defiance of current economic realities of the fossil fuel industry,” she said. “In short, this exacerbates the current public health crisis as well as the global climate crisis.”