

COALITION APPLAUDS BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT FOR WITHDRAWING
EIGHT PARCELS OF LAND NEAR CHACO CANYON, NEW MEXICO FROM OIL AND
GAS LEASE SALE

BLM's Action Comes After Hopi Tribe Formally Protests Inclusion of Lands in Lease Sale

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Washington, D.C. (October 6, 2009) -- On September 29, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) withdrew eight parcels of land covering over 10,000 acres from an oil and gas lease sale scheduled to take place in Santa Fe on October 21. All of these parcels are located within a few miles of northwest New Mexico's Chaco Canyon—a premier unit of the National Park System and one of only twenty World Heritage Sites in the United States. Some of the parcels also bordered proposed wilderness areas in this unique desert landscape.

BLM chose to withdraw the parcels after receiving a formal protest letter from the Hopi Tribe. A coalition of organizations—the San Juan Citizens Alliance, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, Dine CARE, Chaco Alliance, Western Resource Advocates, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation—had planned to file a similar objection with BLM. The coalition believes that oil and gas drilling on the eight parcels, some of which are only 2.5 miles from the park's northern border, would permanently scar the magnificent vistas visible from the mesas above Chaco Canyon. Drilling would also create conflicts with park visitors by introducing industrial traffic onto the park's access road. Due to the lack of development in the area, the road currently experiences sparse use, even by park visitors.

"It's hard to imagine a more inappropriate location for gas drilling," said Jonathan Poston, director of the National Trust's Southwest Regional Office. "Visitors are transported into a different world when they come to Chaco. The sense of mystery, culture and history they experience there would be shattered by industrial development on the park's doorstep."

In the letter, sent by the Hopi on September 28, the tribe notified BLM that the sale could "adversely affect Chaco" and "other ancestral sites" nearby. The letter also called out BLM for neglecting to notify and consult with the Hopi over the sale, even though the tribe claims cultural affiliation to the original inhabitants of Chaco Canyon, believes that the canyon is a "traditional cultural property," and is currently consulting with BLM over a proposal to pave the dirt access road to the park.

"[W]e protest this lease sale and request it be cancelled or postponed until appropriate consultations are conducted," the Hopi's letter stated. "We further request that the responsible officials with [BLM] meet with us to consult on this and any other pending proposals with the potential to adversely affect cultural resources significant to the Hopi Tribe."

“The BLM did the right thing in removing these leases,” said Mike Eisenfeld, New Mexico Energy Coordinator for the San Juan Citizens Alliance. “Approximately 97% of the 1.2 million acres of federal lands in the BLM Farmington area have already been leased for oil and gas. There are over 35,000 producing natural gas wells in the region requiring industrial infrastructure that is incompatible with the values required to maintain a World Heritage site as vital as Chaco.”

Because the lease sale is but the latest in a series of recent threats to the integrity of Chaco Canyon, the coalition plans to move forward with proposals to achieve greater protection for this national treasure to ensure that future generations can enjoy the same magical experience that awaits today’s visitors. Other issues of concern regarding Chaco Canyon include a proposal by San Juan County to pave the park’s access road, a 2006 decision by the New Mexico State Land Office to lease for oil and gas development a parcel located one mile south of Chaco, and air quality impacts from fossil fuel development and coal-burning power plants in the Four Corners region.

Chaco Canyon was prominently featured in Ken Burns’ recent PBS documentary, “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.” After Congress passed the Antiquities Act in 1906, Chaco Canyon was the fifth national monument designated by President Theodore Roosevelt. The biggest threat back then was looters and vandals; today, it’s oil and gas companies pushing for increased access to one of our most treasured landscapes.

“100 years after President Theodore Roosevelt’s visionary proclamation, it’s time for a new generation to stand up for protection of these priceless cultural resources,” said Anson Wright, Coordinator of the Chaco Alliance. “President Obama should be ready to carry on the tradition of ensuring that America’s best idea retains its promise in a new century.”