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Center for Native Ecosystems* Colorado Wilderness Network* The Wilderness Society*
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**City of Craig, Area Residents and Conservation Groups Ask BLM to Remove
Northwest Colorado's Watershed, Wildlife Habitat, and Recreational Areas from
May Lease Sale**

*Elkhead Reservoir, Black-Footed Ferret Habitat, and Recreational Quality Lands Under
Threat to Oil & Gas Leasing*

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CRAIG, CO –The City of Craig, residents, and citizen's from northwestern Colorado are making a last ditch effort to protect the area's special places and a critical water supply by asking the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to do the right thing and remove wild and important places from the May 11th oil and gas drilling lease sale – groups filed formal protests today asking BLM to remove select parcels from the sale.

“Colorado has experienced this before, where oil and gas companies come in change our landscape and then move on regardless of the impacts to our public lands and area residents,” said Jane Yazzie, a Craig area resident. “BLM's prudent course would be to remove parcels from the sale that would negatively impact our water, recreation and tourist industry, quality of life, and the area's wilderness quality lands and wildlife habitat.”

On the chopping block includes parcels that the City of Craig plans to develop for recreational opportunities as well as parcels near Elkhead Reservoir and drainage basin (an emergency source of drinking water for the City of Craig), habitat for the endangered black-footed ferrets, wilderness quality land, and tens of thousands of acres of public lands currently undergoing Resource Management Plan (RMP) revisions – a federally managed public process that, once complete, serves as management guidelines for public lands.

The May lease sale will be one of the largest on record for Colorado, and includes more land than all four sales for 2005 combined – 191 thousand acres for 2005 versus the over 195 thousand acres slated for sale in May.

“Water is as good as gold in arid Colorado,” said Pete Kolbenshlag of Colorado Environmental Coalition, referencing portions of the Elkhead Reservoir basin that have been included in the upcoming lease sale. “As Northwest Colorado continues to grow we can't afford to put our water supply in jeopardy just to benefit the oil and gas industry. And BLM seems to have missed the fact the one of the parcels listed falls within the Colorado State Parks Elkhead Reservoir Recreation Master Plan.”

Recreation is big business in Northwest Colorado. According to BLM's own report, ["Public Rewards from Public Lands"](#), 2003, of the 67.8 million recreation visitor days on BLM-managed lands, nearly 30 million were spent camping and picnicking, over seven million hunting or fishing, nearly five million in interpretation, education, and viewing public land resources, nearly six million in nonmotorized travel, and nearly five million in specialized non-motor sports, events, and activities.

“Hunters, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts come to our area because of the recreational opportunities it offers. Our natural resources are the City of Craig’s biggest asset,” said Wes McStay, a Northwest Colorado rancher. “I’m just not sure how a rush to drill provides any real long-term benefits to local residents. What happens when the oil and gas companies leave?”

“The rush to drill in Northwest Colorado seems even more questionable as oil and gas development has rapidly expanded in western Colorado in the past six years,” stated Steve Smith of The Wilderness Society. “There is a large backlog of surplus, unused leases already issued. BLM can and should exercise the discretion afforded it under federal law and remove questionable parcels from the upcoming lease sale.”

The Wilderness Society’s report, ["Drilling in the Rocky Mountains? Not so Fast! An Assessment of Surplus Drilling Permits and Leases on Federal Public Lands"](#), April 2004, cited the BLM’s leasing and permit-to-drill records to find that 70 percent of the federal public lands leased in Colorado for oil and gas development are not in production and that in five western states only about 19,000 of over 25,000 permitted wells have been drilled.

Also at issue in this lease sale are 20 parcels in Rio Blanco County that are managed as a reintroduction and recovery site for black-footed ferrets. Despite the recommendations of local BLM officials and biologists to defer leasing in this area, all of the Wolf Creek Management Area for black-footed ferret recovery is offered up in this sale.

“The BLM wants to open this area to drilling at the same time they are releasing a highly endangered wildlife species back into the wild there,” said Erin Robertson, staff biologist for Center for Native Ecosystems. “Why would the BLM undermine the chances of this important recovery program?”

"After two decades of hard work and the expenditure of millions of dollars of private and public money, the black-footed ferret remains in a very precarious position," said Dr. Rich Reading, Director of Conservation Biology at the Denver Zoological Foundation. "It makes no sense to throw another major challenge at this critically endangered species just as we are beginning to see progress toward recovery."

In addition, conservation groups question BLM inclusion of the several parcels currently undergoing RMP revisions including the Little Snake Resource Area – Pinion Ridge. Ironically the primary purpose of the plan revision is to determine the management

prescriptions for future oil and gas development, if any, and to consider new protective measures for the area's resources.

“BLM is currently considering no leasing alternatives to protect the backcountry in Pinion Ridge through the current planning process. In fact, a draft is due out this summer, but yet, BLM has slated this area for lease in the upcoming sale,” stated Reed Morris of the Colorado Wilderness Network. “BLM is supposedly taking public comment on the future of the area, but if the lease sale goes forward as is, Pinion Ridge will go from a sportsman's playground to an oil and gas field.”

“Northwest Colorado is home to a wild landscape with spectacular scenery, wildlife, unique geology, and recreational opportunities that deserves to be protected for its ecological values and natural beauty,” continued Morris. “BLM should embrace its role as the steward of our natural legacy rather than employing an aggressive development agenda.”

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