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PRESS RELEASE

Department of the Interior Continues Oil and Gas Lease Application Review During Government Shutdown

Conservation group questions BLM actions favorable to the oil and gas industry during the government shutdown

Billings, Mont. -- Since the Government closed on Dec. 22nd, [224 oil well applications](#) have been accepted, [22 drilling permits](#) have been approved, and [15 oil and gas leases](#) have been approved by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) across western states while information and normal methods of public comment have been shut off to the public. While the majority of Federal Government agencies have been reduced to skeleton crews of “excepted” employees responsible for cases of emergency, the Department of the Interior (DOI) has recalled and directed more than 800 agency staff to continue the processing of oil and gas lease applications and sales across the West. The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is concerned that the BLM has approved Applications for Permit to Drill (APDs) and continued protest periods for lease sales even though no agency staff can be reached by the public and staffing of their safety and environmental review programs are bare-bones.

"This 'energy first' administration has recalled furloughed Bureau of Land Management employees during the shutdown, claiming they are 'essential'. With the BLM barricaded behind closed doors while giving industry preferential treatment, including in Northwest Colorado, citizens have no opportunity to contribute to the decisions being made. Voiceless, our families and communities are at risk because well inspections and other tasks designed to protect public health and safety are being sidelined." said Western Colorado Alliance member and retired engineer, Barbara Vasquez of Cowdrey, CO.

The [BLM Contingency Plan](#) from early January states that a number of employees retained during the shutdown are directed to continue “inspections and enforcement for oil and gas ... operations,” but whether the staff is carrying out these duties, and to what extent, cannot be ascertained during the shutdown. Freedom of Information Act requests, routine press inquiries, and calls to BLM Field Offices have gone unanswered since the government shutdown began more than a month ago, and information needed for the public to submit comments on many proposed rules, leases and permits are not available online.

According to BLM data, leases and APD’s approved while agency staff are unreachable include 13 [new wells](#) approved for drilling in North Dakota, [13 more](#) wells approved in Wyoming, and [twelve new leases sold](#) in Colorado, consisting of thousands of acres of subsurface rights.

“I live surrounded by oil and gas wells, and this shows me that the BLM cares more about the oil and gas industry than it does about those of us whose health and safety are on the line,” said Lisa DeVille of Mandaree, North Dakota, a member of Fort Berthold POWER and Dakota Resource Council. “They need to focus on doing things right, not just issuing leases and permits. If the government is shut down, everything except the real emergencies needs to be shut down, and that doesn’t include oil and gas leases.”

“I am extremely disheartened by the fact that the Little Snake BLM Office is closed to the public yet leases and APDs are being processed and approved,” stated Western Colorado Alliance member Diane Miller. “If no one is there to answer the phone or field questions and concerns, how are the BLM’s responsibilities to the public being carried out?”

On Monday, the non-profit Public Employees for Environmental Accountability [requested](#) that the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate DOI’s potential violations of the Antideficiency Act. The letter specifically identifies the unknown funding source for non-emergency oil and gas leasing operations at the BLM as potentially in violation of the Act.

“My former colleagues at the Wyoming BLM paint a picture where the oil and gas industry is directing what will happen in the department,” said Marilyn Ham, a retired Wyoming BLM employee and leader with Powder River Basin Resource Council. “The fact that money was magically found by BLM to prioritize and process oil and gas permitting over health and safety is just the most recent example of this.”

“The current administration is putting Montanans and our livelihoods at risk by leasing and permitting without regard to the laws of the land. Nonessential employees at the BLM were ordered back to work to permit and process oil and gas leases without the staff or resources needed to do it right. Montana is too important to put these short-term gains over the long-term health of our land and water. This will harm farmers, ranchers, and all of us who depend on the lands being leased for our livelihoods and enjoyment,” said Northern Plains Resource Council member, Sue Beug.

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The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a network of grassroots organizations that span seven of the Western states with more than 15,000 members. Many WORC members live on lands overlying and neighboring federal, tribal, state and privately owned oil and gas deposits, and experience numerous impacts due to federal oil and gas production. Headquartered in Billings, Montana, WORC also has offices in Colorado and Washington, D.C.