



Coalition petitions to shield tracts from leasing near N.M. park

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SANTA FE, N.M. -- A coalition filed a petition today asking the Bureau of Land Management to protect tracts near Chaco Canyon National Historic Park in New Mexico from oil and gas leasing.

The petition -- filed by WildEarth Guardians, the Society for American Archaeology, the New Mexico Archeological Council, the Chaco Alliance and the San Juan Citizens Alliance -- calls on BLM to designate land near the park an "area of critical environmental concern," or ACEC, citing its "cultural significance, wilderness characteristics, remoteness, and undeveloped nature."

The proposal is primarily aimed at prohibiting new oil and gas leasing in an area that's part of the Mancos-Gallup play and is coveted by energy companies. BLM is weighing whether to lease thousands of acres for oil and gas drilling.

"Hopefully the ACEC is a way to push the agency to do the right thing and slow down and take a look at how the landscape will be impacted if leasing goes forward," said Samantha Ruscavage-Barz, a staff attorney for WildEarth Guardians and a former archaeologist at Bandelier National Monument in northern New Mexico.

The Greater Chaco Canyon ACEC would encompass BLM lands, as well as lands to which BLM owns the mineral rights, within a 1.1-million-acre area around the park. The area is a checkerboard of federal, state, tribal and private lands.

"The area is kind of fragmented," said Jeremy Nichols of WildEarth Guardians. "We did the best we could to take into account this fragmentation while at the same time staying true to a key principle of protecting the cultural significance of the landscape."

In crafting the proposal, the coalition aimed to include lands that are visible from the park and encompass BLM surface tracts or BLM-managed minerals, Nichols added.

Dave Evans, manager of BLM's Farmington, N.M., field office, said he hasn't had a chance to review the proposal, but he suggested that an ACEC probably isn't necessary.

"We feel we've provided adequate protection for the lands around Chaco," he said. The agency has already designated several ACECs to protect cultural resources beyond the boundaries of the park, he added.

"We feel we have a balance of protection, development, conservation and preservation," he said.

The petition comes the day after BLM withdrew 34 of 38 parcels around the historical park from an upcoming lease sale, saying it needs to assess wilderness characteristics in the area before offering those parcels for leasing. If any of the four remaining parcels are leased at the sale, scheduled for January, stipulations to protect natural and cultural resources can be added then, Evans noted.

BLM's decision follows the International Dark-Sky Association's designation of Chaco as a "Dark Sky Park" due to its prime stargazing opportunities.

Nichols commended BLM for withdrawing most of the leases.

"This is a significant announcement and major vindication of how important this landscape is," Nichols said. "For Chaco, wilderness and culture are extremely intertwined."

BLM could offer any of the deferred leases again in the future, though, underscoring the need for an ACEC, he added.

But Matt Garrington of the Western Energy Project said he feels BLM is heading in the right direction.

"I think the BLM did the right thing yesterday, and they're on a pretty good track to make sure there's responsible development," he said.

BLM is currently crafting an environmental impact statement to examine the potential effects of energy development in the larger area overlying the Mancos-Gallup formation, including the Chaco area, Evans said.

"We took it upon us as an agency to take a hard look and not wait until we had industry waiting at the doorstep, and look at opportunities where we can do responsible energy development," he said.

Chaco Canyon, a remote area in northwestern New Mexico, is known for its ancient Puebloan ruins. The area is sacred to tribes that trace their ancestry to the ancient Pueblos, who inhabited the area in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Environmental groups also have expressed concern over potential leasing near several other parks and monuments, including Mesa Verde National Park and Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado. Drilling is already occurring around Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota.

