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Deal helps protect 1.7 million acres in Fishlake National Forest

Fishlake Forest » Deal ensures safeguards on 1.7 million acres open for leasing in south-central Utah.

By Brian Maffly

Oil and gas development on Utah's Fishlake National Forest is still possible under a deal the U.S. Forest Service has reached with environmentalists, but it will face strict guidelines for protecting air quality and wildlife habitat.

WildEarth Guardians and the Grand Canyon Trust last week hailed the agreement as a victory because it will keep drill rigs, roads and well pads out of at least 1.3 million of the 1.7 million acres covered in a leasing plan the Forest Service approved last year.

The agency agreed to bar disturbances within four miles of sage grouse leks, the areas used for mating rituals, and withdraw 6,700 acres covered in four natural research areas from any future mineral leasing.

These and other provisions will ensure potential drilling doesn't degrade natural values and cultural resources in the scenic, remote headlands above Utah's fabled canyon country, according to Kevin Mueller, WildEarth's Utah-Southern Rockies conservation manager.

"There is a portion of the forest where wells could go up but they will have exceptionally strong stipulations," Mueller said. "Even where there is development it would be more protective than is the standard."

The deal resolves the groups' appeal of a Forest Service decision to allow leasing on the highlands of south-central Utah, such as the Boulder and Monroe mountains and the Tushar range. The plan guided leasing on all of the Fishlake forest and the Teasdale district of the Dixie National Forest.

The decision would have enabled 73 wells and 166 miles of new roads, environmentalists say, although any proposed development would be the subject of a new environmental review.

A leasing plan became necessary after industry nominated thousands of acres of public lands in Sevier, Beaver, Piute and Millard counties in 2006. Since then the price of natural gas has crashed, so the appetite for drilling may have waned.

Environmentalists' chief problems with the plan were "loopholes and vague wording" that could allow industry to bypass many of its protective measures. The new agreement eliminates such

exemptions through 23 pages of stipulations that will be attached to any lands the Bureau of Land Management leases on 1.7 million acres covered in the plan.

"The half a million people that visit the Fishlake each year can thank the Forest Service for developing a plan to better protect wildlife, scenic vistas, and air and water quality." said Joro Walker, attorney for Western Resource Advocates.