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Conservationists Stop Oil and Gas Sales

Leases on Monongahela National Forest Pulled from Federal Auction

CHARLESTON, W. Va.—Conservationists prevailed today in an effort to stop the sale of publicly owned oil and gas on the Monongahela National Forest below Spruce Knob. The groups asserted that oil and gas development on the two proposed lease parcels would threaten endangered bats, a native brook trout fishery, clean drinking water, and other recreational, ecological and scenic resources of the Forest.

The Bureau of Land Management intended to offer the leases for auction today in a broader sale that includes parcels in Alabama, Arkansas, Ohio, and other states. However, formal protests filed two weeks ago by a number of state, regional, and national groups against the Monongahela sales prompted the agency to withdraw the parcels, much as it did almost exactly a year ago, when oil and gas leases proposed for the Monongahela were also protested by conservation groups, and then withdrawn just before auction.

“Endangered bats are dying of white-nose syndrome a few miles from these drill sites, yet the Forest Service wants to put toxic drill pits in their habitat, and potentially disrupt the caves they live in,” said Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. The newly emergent disease that has killed over a million bats in the eastern United States over the last three years was discovered in West Virginia in 2009, and this winter, white-nose syndrome was found in one of the most significant bat caves in the country, in Pendleton County.

Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, based in Charleston, said, “Once more, the Forest Service put up sites for oil and gas development, but failed to do the analysis and consultation that would ensure better protections for our wildlife, clean water, and underground cave systems. Once more, we pointed this out in our protest, and we won.”

A total of four separate protests were filed against the Monongahela oil and gas leases. A multi-group protest was filed by the Wilderness Society, Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Blackwater, Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County, West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, Friends of Allegheny Front, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, and the Laurel Mountain Preservation Association. Protests were also filed by Trout Unlimited, the Mountain Institute, and the National Wildlife Federation. A letter of concern was filed by the Southern Environmental Law Center after the protest deadline passed.

One of the proposed leases for federally owned mineral rights is located in Randolph County along Gandy Creek, near the small town of Little Italy, and just west of the Spruce Knob unit of the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area. The lease site lies within an area proposed for wilderness designation. The other site is located in Pendleton County, next to the West Virginia-Virginia state line, southwest of the town of Cherry Grove. The Laurel Fork, a famous trout stream, flows through this parcel. The gas lease is located adjacent to the Laurel Fork Inventoried Roadless Area on the George Washington National Forest (GWNF) in Virginia. In 1997, the GWNF withdrew its consent to oil and gas leasing there. Altogether, a little less than 4,400 acres were to be leased in the oil and gas sale.

The last-minute decision to pull the Monongahela leases was made by the Bureau of Land Management, which administers energy and mineral leasing on federal land. Previous statements by the Bureau had indicated that the agency would allow the Monongahela lease sales to go

forward, despite the protests.

“The Forest Service is completely unprepared to deal with the environmental consequences of these leases,” stated Rodd. “The Monongahela’s 2006 Forest Plan was already relying on an outdated oil and gas analysis, and these two leases alone would have sextupled the amount of acreage and impacts the plan had anticipated.”

Oil and gas drilling, particularly that utilizing the controversial technique known as hydrofracking, has been associated with stream and groundwater contamination. Similar oil and gas developments in other states have been found to contaminate private wells, threatening the health and safety of local residents. Conservation groups were concerned that the karst geology of Pendleton and Randolph counties made water resources there particularly vulnerable to widespread pollution problems, as chemicals used in the hydrofracking process could spread by the vast number of underground fissures and channels.

Last year, the Obama administration announced its intent to review oil and gas policy for federal lands. As energy prices creep upwards again, conservationists worry that oil and gas drilling will proliferate on the East’s national forests without proper review or environmental protections. While the Monongahela leases were dropped, today’s auction included parcels on the Wayne National Forest in Ohio, and the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests in Arkansas, among others. The sale was held in Springfield, Virginia, at the Bureau of Land Management Eastern States Office. Additional documents can be found at www.saveblackwater.org.

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The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 255,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Friends of Blackwater is a not-for-profit West Virginia membership organization devoted to preserving wilderness and wildlife; protecting the state’s forests, parks, rivers, wild lands, unique habitats and endangered species; and fostering a land preservation ethic. It has over 10,000 members and supporters.