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BLM drops WV forest lands from oil, gas auction

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CHARLESTON, W.Va.

The federal Bureau of Land Management has dropped West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest from next week's planned oil and gas lease auction so it can review protests from environmental groups who oppose drilling in the forest.

In addition to pulling the 2,317 acres in West Virginia, administrative errors prompted BLM to pull about 1,034 acres in Alabama and about 1,378 acres in Arkansas from Thursday's auction, said Terry Lewis, with the agency's Eastern States office.

The agency originally planned to conduct oil and gas lease auctions on 66 parcels covering 31,445 acres in national forests located in West Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Michigan. The BLM manages surface and mineral rights on federal land.

The Monongahela National Forest covers 919,000 acres in West Virginia and the proposed lease involved land in the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area. The land was nominated by a company seeking to obtain drilling rights to the area. Agency rules prevent disclosing the company's name, Lewis said.

Friends of Blackwater Canyon and The Wilderness Society opposed the auction, saying drilling could undermine recreation in the region, harm native trout streams and hurt endangered species, including bat populations that are being threatened by white-nose syndrome. The disorder, named for the white smudges of fungus on the noses and wings of hibernating bats, has been blamed for killing thousands of bats from West Virginia to New England.

Lewis said BLM is in a "period of transition" and it wanted to review the issues raised in the groups' protest before putting the leases up for auction.

"It is the Bureau of Land Management that has deleted it, not the forest service," he said. "It doesn't mean it won't ever come back up."

Judy Rodd with the Friends of Blackwater Canyon called the BLM's decision great news.



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"They have come to their senses and realize the irreparable harm that would come from this gas lease," she wrote in an e-mail.

Forest Supervisor Clyde Thompson said Friday the decision gives the BLM and the forest service time to discuss drilling and how to protect the forest.

"The issue doesn't go away," Thompson said. "The issue is still how does this come out as a federal minerals policy, federal energy policy."

The forest has 17 production wells on forest property, 16 of which tap federally owned natural gas deposits.

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