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Boebert local BLM leasing bill debated in House hearing

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- Mar 21, 2024 Updated Mar 21, 2024



Former Rep. George Santos, R-N.Y., left, talks to Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., before President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress at the Capitol, Thursday, March 7, 2024, in Washington.

Shawn Thew - pool, ASSOCIATED PRESS

A bill by Republican U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert seeking to keep the Bureau of Land Management from finalizing plans that as proposed would sharply curtail local acreage available for oil and gas leasing was debated in a hearing by a House of Representatives subcommittee Wednesday.

The agency in a draft revision of its resource management plans for its Grand Junction and Colorado River Valley field offices would close nearly a million acres within the Grand Junction

office's jurisdiction to future oil and gas leasing, and 568,300 acres managed by the Colorado River Valley office.

"This proposed land grab is nothing short of partisan politics meant to further restrict access to the oil and natural gas development that could reinvigorate the economy of Colorado and help energy security for all Americans," Boebert said at a Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands hearing on several bills.

One of those bills, similar to Boebert's, would prohibit finalization of a draft resource management plan for the Rock Springs Field Office in Wyoming. As proposed, that plan would make more than 2 million acres off limits to new oil and gas leasing.

Kathleen Sgamma, president of the Western Energy Alliance oil and gas trade group, testified on Wednesday and in submitted written comments noted that President Biden at the start of his presidency issued a moratorium on new leases on federal lands and waters.

"Lacking the power to do so, this Biden leasing ban was fairly easily overturned in court. BLM is now using the public land use planning process to preclude leasing on vast swathes of land across the West, in effect serving as the Biden leasing ban by other means," Sgamma wrote.

Nada Wolff Culver, the BLM's principal deputy director, told the committee of the BLM's work involving local voices and diverse views and working with state and local governments and others in preparing plans.

The two bills, if enacted, "undermine the public's right to provide input on management of public lands as well as the BLM's ability to steward them," she said.

Pitkin County Commissioner Greg Poschman testified against Boebert's bill and said in written comments that what the draft plans for the two local fields offices "do, quite frankly, is modernize and correct a long-standing and narrow policy of taking land from the American people and leasing it to extractive boom and bust industries."

The BLM is doing the supplemental review of existing plans for the two field offices as a result of a federal court ruling ordering it to revisit oil and gas leasing and air-quality impacts of the Colorado River Valley plan. Under subsequent settlement terms, it agreed to do more work on both plans. Meanwhile, no additional oil and gas leasing is allowed within the two field offices' jurisdictions until the supplemental planning process is complete.

"We are deeply troubled by Rep. Boebert's attempt to circumvent a Court order and dismiss the public input from western Colorado residents the BLM continues to consider as it completes its work on this planning effort," representatives of 20 conservation groups, among them the Western Colorado Alliance and Wilderness Workshop, said in a letter to the House subcommittee leadership. "Further, this legislation would have the unintended consequence of prohibiting the BLM from issuing any new oil and gas leases in these field offices because the Court-mandated supplemental process would never be completed."

Wolff Culver said in written comments to the subcommittee that Boebert's bill, as drafted, "would not obviate the BLM's need to comply with issues identified in the Federal court ruling, nor would it relieve the BLM from its obligation to meet the commitments outlined in the settlement agreements to resolve that and other litigation."

She wrote that if enacted, the bill would “result in the BLM being unable to implement any oil and gas leasing within either field office going forward.”