



January 19, 2023

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Division of Lands and Minerals
Utah State Office
Bureau of Land Management
440 West 200 South, Suite 500
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**Re: American Whitewater, Outdoor Alliance, and Public Land Solutions Scoping
Comments to BLM Utah Fourth Quarter 2023 Competitive Oil and Gas Lease Sale
(#DOI-BLM-UT-0000-2023-0003-EA)**

BLM Planners:

American Whitewater (AW), Outdoor Alliance (OA), and Public Land Solutions (PLS) welcome the opportunity to comment on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Utah Fourth Quarter 2023 Competitive Oil and Gas Lease Sale. The state of Utah contains world-class recreation resources which support 66,700 direct jobs and drive the state's \$6.1 billion outdoor recreation economy.¹ This proposal affects some highly significant recreation resources such as boating on the White River, a stream that is already highly compromised by existing and proposed industrial developments in the region.² We urge the BLM to defer the specific lease parcels noted herein and include a Recreational Resources Preservation Alternative³ in any subsequent Environmental Assessment (EA).

American Whitewater

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with over 6,500 members and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater enthusiasts across the nation. American Whitewater's mission is to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The organization is the primary advocate for the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers throughout the United States

¹ See Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, 2021—Utah, at <https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ORSA-Utah.pdf>.

² See <https://grist.org/energy/enefit-utah-colorado-river-water-oil-mining/>.

³ See BLM Utah 2022 First Competitive Oil and Gas Lease Sale (DOI-BLM-UT-000-2021-0007-EA) at 23.

and connects the interests of human-powered recreational river users with ecological and science-based data to achieve the goals within its mission. Our vision is that our nation's remaining wild and free-flowing rivers stay that way, our developed rivers are restored to function and flourish, that the public has access to rivers for recreation, and that river enthusiasts are active and effective river advocates.

Outdoor Alliance

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

Public Land Solutions

Public Land Solutions is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing comprehensive recreation planning and stakeholder coordination to support effective and sustainable public land solutions. We work at the local, regional, and national level on BLM planning and permitting proposals related to oil and gas leasing, and our primary focus is the protection and enhancement of recreation assets and opportunities to develop durable and robust recreation economies. Our advocacy efforts to protect and enhance recreation assets on public lands include organizing stakeholder workshops, providing detailed comments and proposed maps during BLM comment periods, delivering presentations to local and state governments, and communicating with a wide range of interested stakeholders.

Parcels 1520 and 7674 and White River Recreation Impacts

Through this sale, BLM Utah is proposing to offer 13 parcels/16,619.25 acres located within the BLM's Vernal Field Office. The BLM published a preliminary parcel list with recommended stipulations, providing the public a 30-day scoping period starting December 20, 2022 for comments related to any issues that should be addressed in an analysis of the parcels, and if warranted the BLM will provide an EA with a 30-day review period beginning in early June, 2023. American Whitewater, Outdoor Alliance, and Public Land Solutions ask the BLM to either defer or conduct a full EA related to Parcel



UT-2024-03-7674 (600 acres) that directly abuts a special recreation management area (SRMA), and Parcel UT-2024-03-1520 (1,038.4 acres, broken into two distinct parcels) that directly intersects the White River, a 195-mile river run that starts near Meeker, Colorado and continues to its confluence with the Green River in Utah.⁴ Several conditions point to the need for BLM to defer the sale of Parcels 7674 and 1520 or in the alternative conduct a robust Environmental Assessment that considers impacts from this proposed lease sale to the significant recreation landscape found along the White River.

The White River provides spectacular desert canyon class I and II multi-day boating opportunities especially along the almost 100 miles stretch from Rangely, Colorado to its confluence with the Green River. A BLM pamphlet on floating the White River describes it as “one of the quiet places, where solitude...[is] still very much a part of the outdoor experience.”⁵ The White River is a unique experience for paddlers looking for a family-friendly trip with few crowds. While currently the river reach runs through a landscape dotted with oil and gas development, most industrial developments are hidden from view while on the river, and we are concerned that this lease proposal will significantly negatively alter this river experience, especially where the White River bisects Parcel 1520 in two locations (see map at Exhibit A). This parcel and Parcel 7674, which abuts the White River Special Recreation Management Area, are within the more popular and visited reach of the White River in this area. Any development on this site would negatively impact the viewscape for river runners and other recreation users in or near the river corridor.

Established through the Vernal Resource Management Plan (2008), the White River Special Recreation Management Area is acknowledged as an area where high recreation use is currently occurring.⁶ The White River SRMA is intended to direct recreation funding and personnel to fulfill commitments made to provide specific, structured recreation opportunities such as canoeing, rafting, primitive camping, and hiking. In addition, the Vernal RMP states that the White River SRMA has a “No Surface Occupancy (NSO) [restriction] within line of sight from the centerline, up to one-half mile either side of the river, whichever is less, from where the river enters Section 28, T10S, R23E, to where it leaves Section 18, T10S, R23.”⁷ Because neither parcel noted

⁴ White River, National Whitewater Inventory description, <https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/view/river-detail/1883/main>

⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. Floating the White River. <https://org.coloradomesa.edu/~jerry/guide/white/whteriver9.htm>

⁶ Vernal Resource Management Plan (2008) at 35.

⁷ Vernal RMP at 111.



herein has any stipulations or notices that acknowledge the importance of the White River, the SRMA, or the recreation assets and important natural resources found here, the BLM should defer these leases.

Interior Department Recommendations and Formal Guidance Support the Deferral of Parcels 7674 and 1520

The Department of the Interior's own recommendations (DOI Report⁸) advise against leasing parcels like Parcels 7674 and 1520 because of irresponsible nomination practices that promote speculation at the expense of local communities and the management of resources that could be used for other valuable multiple uses such as outdoor recreation. Indeed, “[w]hen land is under contract for potential oil and gas activity, the shared public lands cannot be managed for other purposes, such as conservation or recreation.”⁹ In addition, the DOI Report identifies the common problem, as with these parcels, whereby:

the burden and expense falls on the BLM to process those parcels consuming BLM staff resources that might otherwise be used for the management of other valuable multiple uses such as outdoor recreation.¹⁰

The BLM should also ensure that this lease sale complies with the guidance the agency provided in the Instruction Memoranda released on November 21, 2022, in particular Instruction Memorandum 2023-007 (IM 2023-007), “Evaluating Competitive Oil and Gas Lease Sale Parcels for Future Lease Sales” which provides guidance regarding the evaluation of nominated lease parcels and the selection of such parcels to be offered in oil and gas lease sales.¹¹ The BLM developed this guidance in response to the recommendation made in DOI’s November, 2022 report that “the BLM should carefully consider what lands make the most sense to lease in terms of expected yields of oil and gas, prospects of earning a fair return for U.S. taxpayers, and conflicts with other uses.” The guidance in IM 2023-007 states that:

BLM will evaluate parcels from submitted EOIs for lease according to ... criteria [including whether there is the] presence of recreation and other important uses

⁸ See *Interior Department Report Finds Significant Shortcomings in Oil and Gas Leasing Programs* (DOI Report) found at <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-report-finds-significant-shortcomings-oil-and-gas-leasing-programs>.

⁹ *Id.* at page 5.

¹⁰ *Id.* at pages 12-13.

¹¹ See IM 2023-007, found at <https://www.blm.gov/policy/im-2023-007>.



or resources, giving preference to lands that do not contribute to the value of such uses or resources....¹²

Further, the filtering criteria found in IM 2023-007 states that:

[a]fter the conclusion of the scoping period but before issuing the draft National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document for the lease sale, the BLM office(s) will apply these criteria and assign a preference value of 'high' or 'low' to EOI parcels. The BLM will generally conduct environmental analysis for lease parcels with a high preference value first for potential inclusion in a lease sale and will defer lease parcels with a low preference value.¹³

Accordingly, because of the significant recreation resources found on parcels 7674 and 1520, and the presence of a Special Recreation Management Area, the BLM should ascribe a "low preference" value and defer these parcels from this lease sale and any future leasing proposals.

In sum, several reasons underscore the need for BLM to defer Parcels 7674 and 1520 and that leasing these parcels would ignore the many underlying systemic problems to the leasing system that DOI readily acknowledges. The BLM should defer these parcels because the agency has considerable discretion to protect public lands, waters, and wildlife, cultural resources and sacred sites, and community health and safety from the impacts of the federal oil and gas program—as articulated in IM 2023-007. However, should the BLM go forward with these leases, the agency should complete a detailed comprehensive Environmental Assessment that considers impacts to outdoor recreation, include a Recreation Resources Preservation Alternative as Utah BLM has done before, and reserve the right to impose future conditions on these leases.

* * *

These comments express the concern that this proposed lease sale will cause impacts on specific recreation assets and other valuable resources, could be detrimental to recreation experiences and the local recreation economy, and run counter to DOI's own recommendations and guidance.

Best regards,

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*





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EXHIBIT A



