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## **Public gets first look at BLM Master Leasing Plan proposals**

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05.22.14 - 09:22 am

The Bureau of Land Management's local district office oversees some of the most spectacular landscapes in the West, yet many of those same areas are rich in natural resources.

Western Spirit Cycling Adventures Ashley Korenblat has long asked herself how the agency can find the right balance between long-term protection and development of those lands.

"The central question facing Moab right now is: how do we optimize our opportunities for both recreation and resource extraction?" Korenblat said earlier this month.

After four years of work, the BLM's Canyon Country District Office has a tentative answer for her, and for anyone else who shares her interest in the future of Moab-area public lands.

On May 14, the BLM released its preliminary Master Leasing Plan alternatives for new oil, gas and potash leases on more than 783,000 acres of lands it manages in southern Grand and northern San Juan counties.

The proposals range from a no-action alternative that would keep the status quo in place, to others that could restrict development or close hundreds of thousands of acres to future oil, gas and potash leases.

The agency isn't expected to issue a final decision on the plan until January 2016, and it normally wouldn't come forward with its proposals at this point, according to Canyon Country District Manager Lance Porter.

"We usually don't go out to the public with our preliminary alternatives," Porter said.

In this case, however, Porter said his agency felt that it was important to reach out to stakeholders.

"Having a public process is important to us," he said.

Assistant BLM Field Manager Lisa Bryant estimated that about 100 people showed up at the May 14 open house on the preliminary alternatives.

"[It] was an excellent turnout and we appreciate everyone taking the time and getting involved," Bryant said.

Porter said that any comments the BLM gathers between the open house and May 28 could help the agency improve its alternatives in the weeks and months to come.

“This is an opportunity for us before we start the impact analysis to see if there’s anything that we might be missing,” Porter said.

### **Supporters: Process achieves a balance**

Right now, there are 29 active oil and gas wells within the Moab planning area, and the agency projects that energy developers will drill 128 new well pads over the next 15 years. The BLM also foresees moderate to strong development potential for potash – a key ingredient in fertilizer.

Yet even as more developers turn their attention to the area’s natural resources, tourism and recreational activities are also on the rise.

By the BLM’s estimates, about 1 million visitors flock to lands within the planning area each year, and Korenblat believes the Master Leasing Plan process will help protect those attractions through better zoning.

“We have some of the most unique and beautiful landscapes in the world,” she said. “This land is owned by all Americans ... We have an obligation to take care of it for the rest of the country.”

National Parks Conservation Association Southwest Regional Director David Nimkin said his group also supports the BLM’s efforts.

“We are very much strong advocates of this process,” Nimkin said. “We hope that it sets a standard for applications in all manner of energy development work in the future.”

Nimkin said his group is happy that the BLM’s initial range of alternatives clearly identifies issues that Arches and Canyonlands National Park officials have raised.

“We really have appreciated (this process) as we’ve learned how closely the BLM has worked with the National Park Service in sorting through this,” he said.

### **Critics: Process is redundant**

Grand County Council member Gene Ciarus stands firmly among those who believe the Master Leasing Plan process needlessly duplicates the BLM’s current guidelines.

“I don’t necessarily agree with it,” he said May 14. “I think that most of it is already included in the Resource Management Plan.”

Fidelity Exploration & Production spokesman Tim Rasmussen, whose company has developed oil and gas wells in the Big Flat area, agrees.

“Fidelity appreciates the good intentions behind the Master Leasing Plan concept but we feel that it represents a redundant layer within current National Environmental Policy Act methodology,” Rasmussen said May 21.

Current federal law gives the BLM the power to identify and evaluate any potential impacts that a project could have on resources, according to Rasmussen. It also empowers the agency to impose stipulations or conditions to protect those resources, Rasmussen said.

### **Alternatives vary in size and scope**

If the BLM ultimately signs off on a final Master Leasing Plan decision, developers could expect to face more restrictions on activities in certain areas.

For instance, controlled surface use and timing limitation areas would be open to mineral leasing, but the BLM would place specific constraints on operations there.

Under the current range of alternatives, those designations could be applied to anywhere from 95,009 acres to 440,356 acres of new oil and gas leases. The same designations could also apply to 0 to 440,356 acres of new potash leases.

A separate no-surface occupancy designation would close other areas to exploration or mineral development. However, resources under those areas could be developed through horizontal or directional drilling on nearby lands where no such restrictions are in place, according to the BLM.

As of right now, the no-surface occupancy restrictions would apply to anywhere between 138,103 acres to 564,990 acres of new oil and gas leases, and 0 to 138,103 acres of new potash leases.

Other alternatives would leave more than 210,000 acres open to new oil, gas and potash leases, while the most restrictive alternatives would close 119,563 acres to any new oil and gas development. The most restrictive alternative would also close more than 726,000 acres to new potash leases.

### **Stakeholders continue to review proposals**

At this point, Fidelity hasn't submitted any specific comments on the BLM's preliminary alternatives. But Rasmussen said the company is concerned that the process could impact existing leases.

“[Although] in concept the MLP process should only affect unleased oil and gas

parcels, there are indications and concerns that valid existing lease rights could be affected and potentially stranded by restricted access through unleased areas,” he said.

Other stakeholders are also trying to figure out how the various preliminary alternatives could affect them.

American Potash Director Mike Sieb, whose company is developing the Green River Potash Project west of Moab, said he and his team are currently reviewing the proposals and have no comment at this time.

### **How to get involved**

For more information about the draft preliminary alternatives, go to:  
[www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/moab/MLP/preliminary\\_alternatives.html](http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/moab/MLP/preliminary_alternatives.html).

The BLM is currently accepting public comments on the preliminary alternatives; all comments should be received by Wednesday, May 28.

Comments can be emailed to: [blm\\_ut\\_mb\\_mlpcomments@blm.gov](mailto:blm_ut_mb_mlpcomments@blm.gov); written comments can also be mailed to: Bureau of Land Management, Canyon Country District Office, 82 E. Dogwood, Moab UT 84532, Attention: Moab Master Leasing Plan.

Porter said his office is hoping to release a draft version of the alternatives some time this fall.

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