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BLM begins oil shale hearings in Utah

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SALT LAKE CITY

Environmentalists are urging the Bureau of Land Management not to develop nearly 2 million acres of land in Utah, Wyoming and Colorado for oil shale and tar sands use.

The first of seven hearings began on Tuesday in Utah following a decision by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to take a fresh look at a federal oil shale plan that was released in 2008 by the Bush administration.

That plan would open about 2 million acres of Western public lands to oil shale research and development. The potential impacts include water pollution, huge power needs and boom-bust economic risks.

"The scoping process is designed to explain to the public what we're about to do and gather their input early on," said Mitch Leverette, chief of the Solid Minerals Division for the Bureau of Land Management. "Based on their comments, we hope to offer a range of alternatives in the final report."

A draft of the report is expected to be completed by late September and the final report completed by December 2012, he said.

The report will provide suggestions and examine the potential impact of development, with as much as 1.9 million acres available for commercial oil shale projects and more than 400,000 acres for tar sands leasing and development.

Environmentalists are concerned not only about the impacts of mining in Utah's San Rafael Swell and the scenic Book Cliffs area, but also the potentials risks to air quality and water supplies downstream.

"If they go ahead with this, it means the U.S. is not serious about climate change," said John Weisheit, a Colorado River guide and founder of Living Rivers who spoke at the hearing in Salt Lake City on Tuesday. "This won't help provide more jobs or solve the oil crisis, but it will damage our water resources so why even get started?"

Living Rivers is currently challenging Utah's approval of a proposed commercial tar sands project in the Uinta Basin, which would be the first of its kind in the U.S. The group contends it would dig up fragile topsoil, destroy limestone plateaus formed over thousands of years and pollute groundwater downstream that flows into the Colorado River. Living Rivers filed a complaint with the state, claiming that the Utah Division of Water Quality didn't accurately assess the potential for widespread environmental damage from the PR Springs mine.

But some companies say there are ways to make oil shale development economically viable and technology that will minimize the environmental impact.

"The cleaner we can produce, the more we can produce," said Ray Ridge, founder of Excalibur Industries Inc., an oil shale extraction technology company, at the hearing on Tuesday. "A lot of opponents believe there are no clean methods of oil shale extraction, which is not true and there are alternative solutions."

Another hearing was planned Wednesday in Price.

Hearings will be held in Wyoming on April 29 in Rock Springs and May 5 in Cheyenne and in Colorado on May 3 in Rifle and May 4 in Denver.



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