

Critics say now is not the time for oil and gas leases in Grand County

Groups urge cancellation of auction

[Amy Joi O'Donoghue](#) Jul 18, 2020, 8:29pm MDT

20131125 Snow and clouds gather in the Canyonlands National Park area Monday, Nov. 25, 2013, in southern Utah.

Scott G Winterton, Deseret News

SALT LAKE CITY — Critics of a planned oil and gas auction on 80,000 acres of public land in Grand County say the move by the Trump administration threatens a thriving recreation economy and imperils key landscapes close to national parks.

More than 100 businesses, as well as the Grand County Council and Moab city, are pushing Interior Secretary David Bernhardt to cancel the September auction planned by the Bureau of Land Management.

“It is bad land management, bad business and bad public relations to allow individual oil and gas speculators to nominate over 80,000 acres for leasing in Grand County, and thus threaten the future of both an important market for

the outdoor industry and Moab's prosperous economy," the group said in letter sent to Bernhardt and copied to Utah Gov. Gary Herbert.

The parcels were nominated for potential oil and gas development by a single company based in Minnesota, which Grand County Council member Evan Clapper says assures the auction will result in a low bid of \$2 per acre or less — meaning it will hardly be a viable money maker for local governments.

"No one is denying that oil and gas has brought important royalty revenues to Grand County," Clapper said in a teleconference Thursday, citing key projects funded over the years through fossil fuel development.

In this case, however, Clapper said the sale is shortsighted and not in the best interest of local government.

"It is really our job to protect the taxpayers in this situation."

Grand County has successfully worked with existing oil and gas producers on public lands to minimize impacts from industry activity, but critics fear the lone actor will be able to come in, bid on the parcel and tie up the land for years, thrusting it into uncertainty.

"Existing leases should be developed first," said Jacques Hadler, general manager of Moab Cyclery.

He added the area where the leases are being offered is a hot recreation destination, offering nine trailheads, three large campgrounds, hiking, canyoneering and more.

The outdoor industry, he pointed out, generates \$12.5 billion for Utah's economy and shouldn't be overlooked by Interior officials.

Brian Merrill, chief executive officer of Western River Expeditions, said the "magic" that happens in Grand County with its thriving recreation economy shouldn't be derailed by oil and gas infrastructure tourists don't want to see — especially at a time when the oil market is in such turmoil.

"I am not a 'never drill' person," he said. "There may be a time we need to auction those lands, but now is not the time."

Jon Dwight, president of Invent Development Partners, is in the process of putting in a resort on school trust lands in the area. He noted that the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration has suspended offering parcels for fossil fuel development given the uncertainty stoked by the coronavirus pandemic.

"SITLA has paused their auctions at this time and Gov. Herbert should urge Bernhardt to do the same," he said.

An oil and gas lease sale by the BLM and a successful

auction does not automatically lead to industry development. The winning company must submit an application to commence any activity on the ground, which is subject to additional federal environmental review and accompanying restrictions.