BLM Puts Off Colorado Oil & Gas Sale

the Associated Press

PAONIA, Colo. (AP) — The Bureau of Land Management is putting off plans to lease 30,000 acres for oil and gas development in Colorado's North Fork Valley.

The BLM had planned to auction off 22 parcels near Paonia, Hotchkiss and Somerset in August. But the agency announced Wednesday that it was deferring the sale and opting to conduct additional analysis based on public comment.

Conservationists, local governments and members of the area's agricultural and tourism industries had raised concerns about leasing the land.

Though the land could theoretically be proposed for auction again, for now opponents are happy, said Paonia resident Pete Kolbenschlag.

"This is a case where a community came together and raised legitimate issues and got the BLM to look at them, and the BLM made the right decision," he said. "It's a happy ending."

The parcels generally circled the North Fork Valley in western Colorado. There are three coal mines in the area, but the region also is home to wineries and organic farms and ranches, some of which voiced concerns about chemical contamination that could cost them their certification as organic producers, Kolbenschlag said.

Irrigation water also passes through the parcels that had been proposed for leasing, Kolbenschlag said.

The party that nominated the parcels for leasing hasn't been disclosed.

Restaurants in Telluride, Aspen and Vail use produce from the North Fork Valley, said area rancher Landon Deane, who raises natural grass-fed beef. She and others had gone to Washington to speak to senators and others about not leasing the parcels. The BLM's deferral was "a huge relief," Deane said.

"I'm so excited, I can't even stand it," she said.

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