

# Reform Public Lands Oil and Gas Leasing to Protect Waterways and Way of Life

*Letter to Interior Department Seeks Reforms to Protect Lands, Waterways, and Taxpayers*

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**BOZEMAN, MT** - Upper Missouri Waterkeeper joined nearly 40 other conservation organizations in a letter sent to the Department of the Interior requesting reforms to the antiquated federal onshore oil and gas leasing program that directly threatens Montana's Big Hole and Beaverhead river valleys.

"The antiquated federal leasing program needs to be reformed to address the direct threats industrial-scale oil and gas development pose to some of Montana's most cherished waterways, like the Big Hole and Beaverhead rivers," **said Guy Alsentzer, Executive Director of Upper Missouri Waterkeeper.** "The institutional preference for development over conservation has cost Montanans in the pocketbook while private oil and gas corporations reap the profits. We can no longer afford to shift costs onto the backs of taxpayers, while also risking the future of our waterways and way of life."

Organizations representing conservation voices in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon, New York, and Washington D.C joined together in submitting common sense recommendations and reforms to the Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland as the department reviews the federal public lands oil and gas program.

## The [letters'](#) reforms and recommendations include:

- Establish a new mandate for the onshore program that recognizes oil and gas leasing as a discretionary action, rather than the dominant use of public lands, that is authorized only when weighed against other uses of public lands including recreation, fish and wildlife conservation, and renewable energy development.

- Guarantee robust public participation and tribal consultation during all leasing and permitting decisions.
- Limit the quantity and scope of competitive sales by clarifying that lease sales are not required and that BLM has the authority to declare lands ineligible for leasing.
- Revoke the informal nomination process that authorizes anonymous lease nominations and switch to a formal nomination process that allows BLM to strategically identify lands suitable for nomination.
- Develop and employ resource “screens” to evaluate nominated leases. These evaluations help reduce conflicts with other uses and include a prohibition on leases with low or no oil and gas potential.
- Ensure the public interest is served by requiring a “public interest” determination prior to issuing noncompetitive leases, and evaluating applicants for their ability to undertake development and make rental payments to avoid the issuance of noncompetitive leases that fail to become developed.
- Strengthen the onshore program’s fiscal framework by increasing the royalty rate, rental rates, and minimum lease bids to guarantee a fair return to taxpayers and discourage the hoarding of undeveloped leases.
- Strengthen the onshore program’s bonding and reclamation framework by eliminating the use of blanket bonds, increasing the oversight of inactive wells and limit the ability of operators to indefinitely delay final reclamation, and work with Congress to obtain funds to clean up orphaned wells and issue a user fee to cover additional reclamation costs.
- Limit participation by speculators and bad actors by establishing criteria to determine “responsible qualified” bidders and prohibiting participation by companies that violate reclamation and other environmental protection standards and fail to make required payments.
- Strengthen oversight of lease suspensions by requiring NEPA compliance and public participation prior to granting lease suspensions.

[Read the full letter and recommendations to the Interior Department here.](#)

The federal onshore oil and gas leasing program has put [Montana’s Big Hole and Beaverhead river valleys](#) at risk from reckless oil and gas development proposals in 2018 and 2019. Thankfully, through the [work](#) of Upper Missouri Waterkeeper (UMW) and others, the Bureau of Land Management placed temporary deferrals of those lease sales, but the threat remains until there is a permanent withdrawal of keynote Southwest Montana landscapes from the federal minerals leasing program.

Oil and gas development in Montana's headwaters threatens pollution impacts while also requiring enormous daily quantities of water, exacerbating the water scarcity challenges waterways like the Big Hole are plagued by each year and threatening our world-class fisheries and the jobs and businesses they support.

The true wealth of southwest Montana lies in clean and healthy landscapes and waterways, not oil and gas development. We look forward to the DOI's long-awaited reform and will continue working toward permanent withdrawal of southwest Montana landscapes from the federal minerals leasing program.

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