

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 2, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Vicki Christiansen
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
201 14th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20227

Dear Secretary Perdue and Chief Christiansen:

We write with serious concerns about the proposed rulemaking by the United States Forest Service (USFS), entitled *Oil and Gas Resources* (85 FR 54311). If this proposal is adopted, oil and gas developers would be gifted lax rules in our National Forests while transparency and critical environmental reviews would be curtailed. Ultimately, the result would be increased carbon emissions that accelerate the climate crisis and harm public and forest health.

Under current oil and gas leasing rules, USFS plays an important role in ensuring that our federal lands serve as a public benefit rather than solely as a vehicle for oil and gas leasing. The proposed rule would degrade this framework. If adopted, the rule would remove important public participation opportunities as USFS identifies whether certain lands should be opened for oil and gas leasing. Additionally, it would undermine USFS's ability to enforce important operating standards with which the extractive industry should be required to comply.

We are also concerned that the rule would:

- Dramatically reduce public engagement and transparency by allowing a USFS office to approve a Surface Use Plan of Operations without posting public notice.
- Erode good forest management practices by allowing USFS to forego necessary environmental reviews associated with leasing decisions.
- Make it difficult for USFS to stop ongoing lease sales.
- Harm important environmental resources by no longer considering environmental consequences of drilling operations as criteria for the approval of Surface Use Plans.
- Undermine USFS's ability to enforce environmental protections by allowing oil and gas developers limitless opportunities to extend deadlines and meet operating standards.
- Leave important federal lands unprotected and ignore the climate crisis that impacts Americans' lives and livelihoods daily by allowing USFS to only protect specific, named natural resources.

Consistent with USFS's mission to care for our National Forests and serve people, and the National Environmental Policy Act's purpose to evaluate environmental consequences and inform the public, we are deeply concerned that this rulemaking seeks to "streamline" management of our National Forests in favor of oil and gas industries over other economic,

recreational, environmental, cultural, and spiritual values. As such, we oppose this rulemaking and encourage the Department of Agriculture and USFS to prioritize resources to properly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

/s/
MIKE LEVIN
Member of Congress

/s/
RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources

/s/
ALAN LOWENTHAL
Chair
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral
Resources

/s/
DEBRA HAALAND
Chair
Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests, and Public Lands

/s/
JARED HUFFMAN
Chair
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and
Wildlife

/s/
DIANA DEGETTE
Member of Congress

Cc: David Bernhardt, Secretary of the Interior