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Contact: Mollie Matteson, Center for Biological Diversity, (802) 434-2388 (office); (802) 318-1487 (cell)
 Judy Rodd, Friends of Blackwater, (304) 345-7663 (office); (304) 552-7602 (cell)
 Mary Krueger, the Wilderness Society, (978) 342-2159 (office); (978) 502-9810 (cell)

Conservationists Victorious Against Oil and Gas Sale Lease on Monongahela National Forest Deleted from Auction

CHARLESTON, W. Va.— Yesterday, a little more than a week after conservation groups filed a protest against a plan to sell oil and gas leases on an area of the Monongahela National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management withdrew the parcel from the upcoming lease sale. The proposed lease involved federally owned mineral rights on Forest Service land near Seneca Creek, just south of the town of Onego, including some units within the popular Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area.

The drilling had the potential to disturb subsurface geology connected to caves. Some of the most important cave habitat in the world for two species of endangered bats lies on private land just a few miles to the east of the proposed oil and gas site.

"This oil and gas project was going to further threaten bat species already spiraling rapidly toward oblivion," said Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have a responsibility to make sure their actions do not harm endangered species or their habitat, and yet that responsibility was being ignored."

The decision to pull the lease sales in the Seneca Creek area was made by the West Virginia director of the Bureau of Land Management, which administers energy and mineral leasing on federal land. The statement in yesterday's official announcement read: "The State Director has requested that this parcel be **deleted** from the lease sale. The USDA Regional Forester for the Monongahela National Forest will reconsider their NEPA analysis and consent to lease" (emphasis in original).

"We are thrilled that the iconic Seneca Rocks area is safe, at least for now, from this ill-conceived proposal, which would have jeopardized bats, brook trout, clean water, a proposed wilderness area, and the scenic beauty and high recreational values so important to the economies of local communities," said Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, a conservation group based in Charleston.

Earlier this week, news emerged that an oil and gas drilling project involving privately held subsurface mineral rights on the Fernow Experimental Forest, within the Monongahela National Forest, jeopardized a cave system harboring endangered Indiana bats, polluted water systems, and killed trees with toxic contaminants from the drilling process. Before project approval, Forest Service staff scientists had expressed deep concerns about the environmental impacts of the project, including the potential harm to bats, but agency administrators disregarded their warnings and allowed the project to proceed.

Dr. John Harman, a Pendleton County native and avid trout fisherman, said, "I'm celebrating today because we have a chance now to protect the Seneca Rocks area from this awful drilling project. Clean water, human health, wildlife, great fishing, beautiful mountains — they're all worth a lot more than enhancing some energy company's bottom line."

Conservation groups opposing oil and gas drilling in the Seneca Creek area had expressed concerns that this drilling would harm resources that are important to local residents and communities, including water quality and stream flows. Noting that a number of private residences are served by wells located near the proposed drilling site, the groups expressed concerns that the federal government had not carefully assessed the risks of groundwater contamination. Similar oil and gas developments on federal lands in other states have been found to contaminate private wells, threatening the health and safety of local residents.

Another critical concern was the dual impact of the drilling and a new disease that has been sweeping bat populations throughout the Northeast — and has recently been confirmed in West Virginia. The mysterious bat-killing illness, known as white-nose syndrome, has been wiping out bat populations in the eastern United States and was recently documented in caves in Pendleton County, where the oil and gas drilling project is located. The Forest Service failed to consider how white-nose syndrome and the oil and gas drilling would affect the endangered bats, and the agency had not consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — a requirement of the Endangered Species Act.

While the lease on the Monongahela has been withdrawn for now, leases located on other eastern national forests will still be auctioned on March 19. The sale is occurring at a time when the role of the Forest Service in regulating oil and gas drilling activities on eastern national forests is increasingly in question.

Historically, the federal government has done little to control or limit oil and gas drilling on national forests where the subsurface rights are privately owned, which is the case on most eastern national forest lands. Even in cases where the government owns the subsurface rights and leases them out, as in the case of the recently withdrawn parcel on the Monongahela, conservationists assert that the agency has traditionally accommodated the interests of oil and gas companies, to the detriment of the environment and local communities that must deal with the water pollution and other negative impacts of drilling.

The conservation groups that filed the protest against the lease sale are the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Blackwater, the Wilderness Society, Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, Friends of Allegheny Front, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, and the Laurel Mountain Preservation Association.

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The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 200,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Friends of Blackwater is a not-for-profit West Virginia membership organization devoted to preserving wilderness and wildlife; protecting the state's forests, parks, rivers, wild lands, unique habitats and endangered species; and fostering a land preservation ethic. It has over 10,000 members and supporters.

The Wilderness Society is a national nonprofit organization that works to protect America's wilderness and wildlife, and to develop a nationwide network of wild lands through public education, scientific analysis and advocacy. It has over 310,000 members.

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P.O. Box 710 . Tucson, AZ 85702-0710 tel: (520) 623.5252 fax: (520) 623.9797 www.BiologicalDiversity.org

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