



April 13, 2018

Submitted via email to BLM_UT_CCD_monuments@blm.gov

Matthew Betenson
Associate Monument Manager
BLM Kanab Field Office
669 S Hwy. 89A
Kanab, UT 84741

RE: Notice of Intent to Prepare Resource Management Plans for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument—Grand Staircase, Kaiparowits, and Escalante Canyon Units and Federal Lands Previously Included in the Monument That Are Excluded from the Boundaries and Associated Environmental Impact Statement, Utah

Dear Mr. Betenson:

Western Energy Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit scoping comments for the Management Plans of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) and federal lands surrounding the monument. Our comments relate to the limited potential for oil and natural gas development in the planning area and the resource protections provided by current law.

Western Energy Alliance represents over 300 companies engaged in all aspects of environmentally responsible exploration and production of oil and natural gas in Utah and across the West. The Alliance represents independents, the majority of which are small businesses with an average of fifteen employees.

In December 2017, a Presidential Proclamation Modifying the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument significantly reduced the size of the monument. The Proclamation modified the boundaries of GSENM in order to ensure the protections afforded the resources protected therein were right-sized in nature and not overly broad and restrictive. The Management Plans should reflect this intent and should ensure any restrictions imposed on “federal lands previously included in the Monument that are excluded from the boundaries” are properly tailored and do not unduly impact the area surrounding the GSENM.

There is some limited potential for oil and natural gas development in the lands surrounding the GSENM, although interest from our member companies in this area has historically been and remains low to nonexistent. The oil potential in the GSENM is generally of heavy oils similar to tar sands, which historically have been economically and technically challenging. To compound that, the rise in shale oil development over the last decade or so in the Bakken of North Dakota, the Niobrara in Colorado and Wyoming, and the Permian Basin in New Mexico and Texas, to name a few shale plays, means that the

R&D necessary to develop these heavy oils has even higher economic hurdles to overcome. Abundant supplies of light crudes that are already economic and enjoy billions of dollars of investment in technological innovation such as horizontal drilling, hydraulic fracturing, and geophysical exploration will continue to suppress interest in the R&D necessary to develop these heavy oils over the 20-year or so planning horizon of the GSENM management plan.

Were interest to increase in the future, there are already sufficient statutory protections in place to protect GSENM. As noted in the *Federal Register* notice, “[t]hose Federal lands excluded from the Monument will remain in Federal ownership and will be managed by the BLM under applicable laws.” Any development on these lands will require compliance with federal laws and regulations, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Historical Preservation Act (NHPA).

The GSENM was created to preserve “a spectacular array of historic, biological, geological, paleontological, and archaeological objects,” according to the 1998 Management Plan. As noted in that Plan, “FLPMA directs the BLM to manage public land on the basis of multiple use and ‘in a manner that will protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historic, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resources, and archaeological values.’” In other words, while BLM may allow for future oil and natural gas development on the federal lands close to GSENM, it cannot do so without providing sufficient protection for the “spectacular array” of objects within the monument.

BLM provides those protections through the NEPA process. As part of its environmental analysis at both the planning and permitting stage, BLM may place restrictions on the project based on the anticipated impacts. These conditions can include timing limitations and surface use restrictions, and they are based on the individual project’s characteristics.

Each year, improvements in technology reduce the footprint of oil and natural gas development, and reclamation techniques continue to improve so that the impact to the land is small and temporary. Over the last decade, oil and gas development has shifted from vertical wells with dense well-pad spacing to directional and horizontal wells with significantly less disturbance and fragmentation per section of land developed. One horizontal well now takes the place of 8 to 16 vertical wells, leading to reductions in well pad disturbances, linear and visual disturbances, and disturbances due to human activity.

BLM works with project proponents throughout the planning process to mitigate impacts through avoidance, minimization, and compensatory mitigation where appropriate. With a lighter footprint on the land, oil and natural gas development continues to coexist with wildlife and habitat conservation. Companies are now able to do more with less to minimize impacts on species and the landscapes they depend upon. The Endangered Species Act provides protections for several species with habitat in the GSENM, and NEPA analysis of any future development will include necessary protections for those species.

Under Section 106 of NHPA, BLM is required to consult with the relevant State Historical Preservation Office on any project that may impact cultural resources. The agency must then ensure adverse impacts to the cultural resources are avoided, minimized, or mitigated. NHPA provides an additional layer of review and protection of GSENM's resources.

Finally, oil and natural gas companies also routinely incorporate measures in project planning to minimize the visual impacts of its operations. Through the NEPA process, BLM will work with companies to limit any impacts to the GSENM landscape. The reduced disturbance created by recent technological advances ensures development can coexist with the rich vistas of the GSENM.

The protections afforded by NEPA, NHPA, and numerous other applicable laws and regulations ensure there is no risk to the monument's resources from oil and natural gas development. The Management Plans should acknowledge this and should not impose overly broad, blanket restrictions that preclude the ability to tailor individual project NEPA plans on the federal lands outside the newly-drawn boundaries of the GSENM.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit scoping comments on the GSENM Management Plans. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Tripp Parks
Manager of Government Affairs