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Department of Interior Reverses BLM Leases

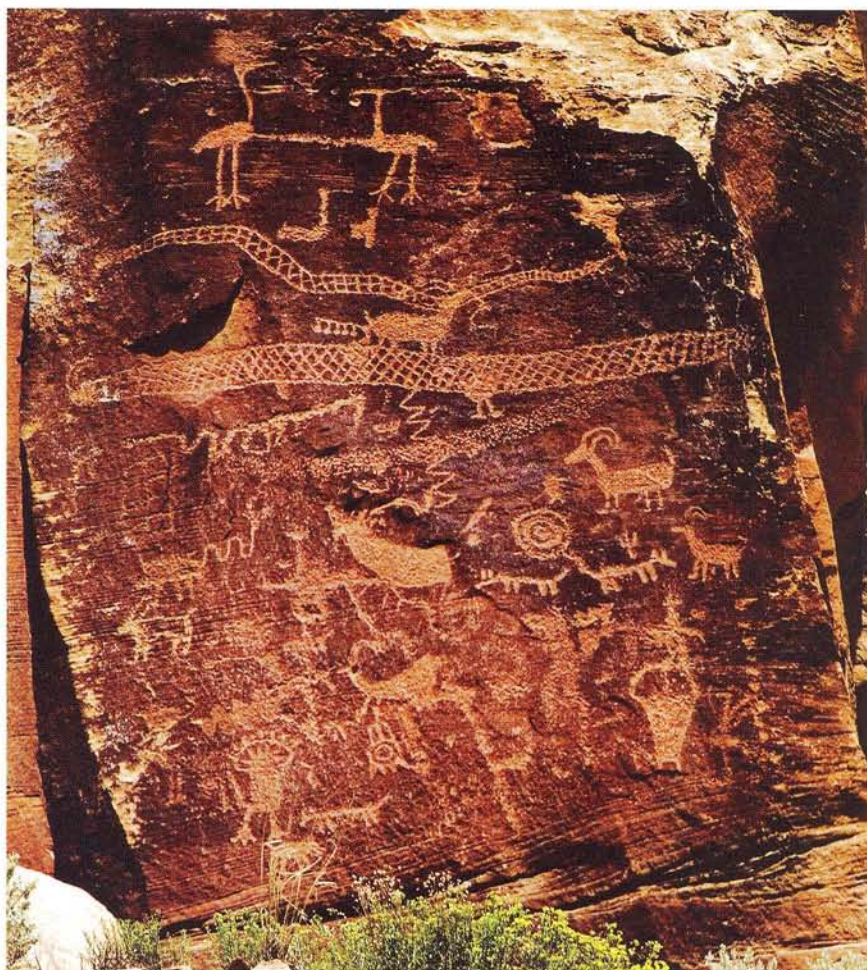
Leases of central Utah lands threatened archaeological sites.

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Board of Land Appeals recently reversed the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) controversial leasing of about 14,000 acres in central Utah for oil and gas development. The board cited the BLM's failure to adequately identify threatened archaeological sites in the area and noted its lack of consultation with affected Native American tribes before offering the parcels for sale in October 2003. The proposed lease parcels are located north of Nine Mile Canyon and just south of the Book Cliffs within the BLM's Vernal District, areas dense with prehistoric archaeological sites, especially spectacular rock art attributed to the Fremont culture.

The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Utah's largest conservation organization, had protested the proposed BLM leases, charging that selling the parcels without an adequate review violated requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act. The board's ruling suspends the leases pending the outcome of an agency review.

Last summer, a U.S. district judge overturned energy leases sold by the BLM in November 2003, and the board previously reversed the agency on leases sold between 2004 and 2006, citing similar BLM failures to adequately address the area's cultural resources. The BLM acknowledged that it was likely too lax in approving energy leases on lands with cultural resources, but noted that it has improved its standards since 2003.

"The Board of Land Appeals



This Fremont rock art panel is located in Nine Mile Canyon. The proposed energy development was on Bureau of Land Management property just north of the canyon.

decision affirms what we have known for a long time: the Vernal BLM has placed the expedited extraction of oil and gas resources far above the agency's mandate to preserve and protect historic properties as required under the National Historic Preservation Act," said Jerry Spangler, executive director of the Colorado Plateau Archaeological Alliance and a member of the BLM

Utah Resource Advisory Committee. "The ruling is great news for preservationists, but a sad commentary on the state of affairs in the Vernal District. Perhaps now the agency will take a deep breath, reexamine its commitment to cultural resources, and renew its public trust to follow the law, all of the law, when it comes to these irreplaceable resources."

—Tamara Stewart