HOLT, HINCHEY, BAIRD LEAD CONGRESSIONAL EFFORT TO PROTECT UTAH PUBLIC LANDS

58 Members of Congress Urge Incoming Department of Interior to Stop Oil and Gas Drilling in Pristine Areas of Utah Wilderness

(Washington, DC) – Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12), Maurice Hinchey (NY-22), Brian Baird (WA-3), and 55 members of Congress today sent the following letter to the Obama-Biden Transition team, urging the incoming Department of Interior to reverse oil and gas leasing in Utah’s Colorado Wilderness Plateau, land which the Bureau of Land Management began auctioning off on Friday, December 19.

December 22, 2008

Obama-Biden Transition Team
Interior Department
451 6th St. NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Interior Transition Team Members,

During the final days of the Bush Administration, a significant number of rules and policies have been finalized and last-minute decisions have been made in a clear attempt to leave a lasting imprint on the policies of future administrations. Of great concern to us is the recent decision by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to open up over 3 million acres of wilderness quality public lands in eastern and central Utah to
oil and gas drilling. Utah’s Colorado Wilderness Plateau holds some of this nation’s most cherished publicly-owned wild landscapes and unique ecosystems, and we would like to encourage you to act quickly to protect these wilderness-quality public lands from the devastating and irreversible environmental impacts of oil and gas drilling.

In mid-November, BLM placed Utah’s vulnerable wild lands at risk by finalizing six Resource Management Plans (RMP) for the Colorado Plateau allowing oil and gas drilling on lands that are currently being considered for a wilderness designation in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act (H.R. 1919). Current members of the House of Representatives, more than 160, have cosponsored this legislation showing their agreement that these lands deserve a wilderness designation and should be protected for future generations. We are writing to ask your assistance in revising these disastrous land-use plans and reversing the oil and gas leases in the areas that H.R. 1919 seeks to protect.

Unless the Obama-Biden Administration acts to reverse these RMPs, these plans will dictate oil and gas leasing activity and off-road vehicle use for over 11 million acres of public land for the next 15-20 years. In drafting these RMPs the BLM has an opportunity to appropriately manage and protect wilderness and cultural resources on millions of acres of unprotected lands that the BLM itself has determined to have wilderness character. Instead the BLM chose not to protect these lands from damaging activity. Now, Utah’s unbalanced land-use plans are having real repercussions on the land.

On November 4, Election Day, the BLM announced a December 19, 2008 oil and gas lease sale covering over 360,000 acres of public land, 60,000 acres of which is proposed for wilderness designation in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act. The BLM rushed to move ahead with this lease sale and in its haste excluded input from the National Park Service (NPS) and others, offering oil and gas leases on public lands adjacent to National Parks.

Outrage over this lease sale, by the NPS and the general public, has since been only marginally addressed by the BLM’s recent agreement to defer on some parcels adjacent to National Park Service units and in other sensitive landscapes. Tens of thousands of acres of public land recently determined by the BLM to possess wilderness character will still be auctioned off on December 19th, 2008. We strongly urge that the Obama-Biden Administration take decisive action and either halt the leasing process for wild public lands in Utah proposed for wilderness designation in Congress, or, if the leases have already been issued, cancel these improperly issued leases and refund the high bidders’ monies.

A stark choice is ahead of us. Will we continue the current short-sighted policies focused on resource extraction and motorized use of public lands or will we find the elusive balance that is needed to continue the multiple uses of public lands, while also protecting those places that we consider special and worthy of wilderness status? These Utah RMPs reflect this choice and we believe the next Interior Department
should revise these terribly unbalanced management plans and cancel the inappropriate oil and gas leases that flowed from these decisions. We look forward to working together to preserve these wilderness areas for generations to come.

Sincerely,

RUSH HOLT
Member of Congress

MAURICE HINCHEY
Member of Congress

BRIAN BAIRD
Member of Congress

TAMMY BALDWIN
Member of Congress

SHELLEY BERKLEY
Member of Congress

HOWARD Berman
Member of Congress

EARL BLUMENAUER
Member of Congress

LOIS CAPPS
Member of Congress

BEN CHANDLER
Member of Congress

EMANUEL CLEAVER
Member of Congress

SUSAN DAVIS
Member of Congress

PETER DEFAZIO
Member of Congress

DIANA DEGETTE
Member of Congress

KEITH ELLISON
Member of Congress

ANNA ESHOO
Member of Congress

SAM FARR
Member of Congress

BARNEY FRANK
Member of Congress

CHARLES A GONZALES
Member of Congress

RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Member of Congress

ALCEE HASTINGS
Member of Congress
MAZIE K. HIRONO  PAUL HODES
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
MIKE HONDA  JESSE L. JACKSON, JR.
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
TIM JOHNSON  CAROLYN KILPATRICK
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
DENNIS KUCINICH  BARBARA LEE
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
SANDER LEVIN  JOHN LEWIS
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
CAROLYN MALONEY  EDWARD MARKEY
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
DORIS MATSUI  BETTY MCCOLLUM
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
JAMES MCGOVERN  JERRY MCNERNEY
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
GEORGE MILLER  GWEN MOORE
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
JAMES MORAN  JOHN OLVER
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
FRANK PALLONE  DONALD PAYNE
Member of Congress  Member of Congress
DAVID PRICE  LORETTA SANCHEZ
ADAM SCHIFF    JOSE SERRANO
CAROL SHEA-PORTER    BRAD SHERMAN
PETE STARK    BETTY SUTTON
MIKE THOMPSON    JOHN TIERNEY
CHRIS VAN HOLLEN    PETER VISCLOSKY
ROBERT WEXLER    LYNN WOOLSEY
DAVID WU    LOUISE SLAUGHTER