Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

February 5, 2009

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Salazar and Secretary Vilsack:

Please accept our heartfelt congratulations on your appointments as Secretary of Interior and Secretary of Agriculture. We look forward to working with you in your new capacities and anticipate positive changes on many fronts at the Departments of Interior and Agriculture.

As sponsors and cosponsors of legislation in the 110th Congress that would permanently protect precious acres of land in the United States through wilderness or other similar designations, we urge you to put a temporary hold on offering any federal oil and gas leases on the areas we're attempting to safeguard. For example, in a last ditch attempt before leaving office to give away precious public land to the oil and gas industry, the Bush administration's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made millions of acres available for lease sales. Many of those acres were the subject of legislation being considered in Congress that would have put them off limits for energy production and protected them in their natural state for this and all future generations to enjoy. By putting a temporary hold on the leasing of these precious acres, your agencies would have time to review the merits of offering such areas for sale and provide Congress with an opportunity to safeguard that land forever.

New federal onshore oil and gas lease sales planned under the Bush administration by the BLM are scheduled to occur in Montana as early as late January 2009 with additional sales scheduled in Wyoming and Colorado for February 2009 and in Utah in March 2009. As you are aware, a lease sale held by the BLM in Utah on December 19, 2008, generated national controversy because of the large number of tracts offered for sale that were located in areas long-proposed for wilderness protection, or in close proximity to National Park units.

On January 17, 2009, a federal district court judge in Washington, D.C. issued a temporary restraining order blocking BLM from issuing 77 of the most egregious leases offered at the December 19 Utah sale, and stated that the plaintiffs were likely to prevail on the merits of their case. This sale, in fact, typified the controversy surrounding the BLM's oil and gas program during the last eight years. The sales planned for 2009 likewise contain lease tracts that harbor important wilderness, wildlife, cultural and other characteristics that would ordinarily disqualify such lands for conveyance to the oil and gas industry. Your agencies have the opportunity to

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correct the gross imbalance that has unfortunately come to characterize the BLM's oil and gas development program – a policy that has prioritized the exploitation of federal oil and gas resources over the protection and proper stewardship of all other resources and values of our public lands.

In order to prevent the conveyance of more sensitive lands to the oil and gas industry, we strongly urge you to direct the BLM and the Forest Service to defer future lease sales of all public land under their jurisdiction that have been the subject of legislation in the 110th Congress that would designate them as wilderness or another protective status. Doing so will allow your agencies time to further review the suitability of such tracts for leasing and development, while allowing oil and gas activities to continue on the tens of millions of acres of federal lands currently under lease. Given the recent District Court decision to halt the issuance of leases on sensitive lands in Utah, this path offers a prudent way to avoid similar court rulings in the future. It will also provide your agencies the opportunity to take further action to protect sensitive areas from development by using existing administrative authorities to temporarily or permanently withdraw such areas from future leasing. Deferring lease sales in these sensitive areas will also provide Congress with the opportunity to take action to establish permanent protection for such areas.

We are convinced that the new administration can have an onshore oil and gas program that both helps meet America's energy needs, and at the same time protects for future generations those lands that harbor a wealth of environmental, wildlife, and cultural values. We believe that in order to bring the balance needed to achieve both goals, your agencies will need to move very early in 2009 to halt the conveyance of more leases earmarked for sale by the Bush administration on lands proposed for protection. Unless such action takes place very soon, more sensitive lands that should be protected will be dedicated to inappropriate oil and gas development activities.

Sincerely,

Maurice Hinchey
Member of Congress

Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

George Miller
Member of Congress

Henry A. Waxman
Member of Congress

Raúl M. Grijalva
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