The administration’s “energy dominance” agenda now includes a push for more oil and gas development in our national forests and grasslands, including iconic landscapes such as Colorado’s North Fork Valley in the Gunnison National Forest, the High Divide in Montana and the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico.

A new proposed rule would cut the public out of the process that decides whether and which lands will be opened to oil and gas drilling, putting the public’s health at risk at a time when people are rightly focused on the Covid-19 pandemic.

If finalized, this regulation will escalate drilling in our national forests. The regulation will remove opportunities for public input, reduce transparency in how leasing decisions are made, weaken the ability of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to close lands to oil and gas development and give excessive leeway to operators who don’t follow the Forest Service laws.

Our national forests and grasslands provide clean drinking water and clean air for millions of people. As countries around the world ramp up efforts to address climate change, here in the United States, our public lands and waters provide an opportunity for the federal government to have an immediate impact on climate change. It is critical to preserve thorough opportunities for the public to provide input about management of their beloved National Forests.

Specifically, the proposed rule:

- Reduces public input and transparency by removing the requirement that a Forest Service office give public notice of the decision to approve a Surface Use Plan of Operations – the specific plan for development.

- Allows the Forest Service to skip necessary and important reviews for leasing decisions. This and other administration roll backs of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) undermine that law’s role in good forest management.

- Makes it more difficult for the Forest Service to stop bad lease sales by removing explicit confirmation of USFS consent as a standard step in the leasing process. Instead, the USFS would have to proactively withdraw consent.

- Removes environmental considerations as criteria for decisions to approve plans.

- Loosens the rules by giving unbounded discretion to extend deadlines for developers to comply with operating standards. Currently, compliance deadlines can only be extended if the operator cannot meet them due to factors out of their control.

- Limits the Forest Service to only protect specific, named natural resources and ignores opportunities to address protecting important wildlands or address climate change.
The administration is currently prioritizing extraction and development on public lands, putting the interests of the fossil fuel industry ahead of the health and survival of our communities and the environment. If public lands and waters were their own country, they would rank as the 5th largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the world – ahead of Japan, Brazil and Germany. That means our national forests and other public lands are a significant factor in the global climate crisis.

Our federal public lands and waters provide critical natural infrastructure to buffer communities against the most severe effects of a changing climate, naturally absorb climate-changing emissions, support the responsible production of renewable energy, support local economies and communities and give us the opportunity to connect with nature and the many health benefits it provides.

The U.S. National Forest system is the envy of the world – but its preservation can’t be taken for granted. By soaking in carbon, cleaning and slowing water and providing refuges and connected habitat for wildlife, these national forests have never been more important to preserving and passing a healthy world forward to future generations.

Congress must act to protect and improve the public’s constitutional right to participate in the comment processes.

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