



# Committee on Natural Resources

Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II - Chairman

1324 Longworth House Office Building - Washington DC, 20515 - <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov>

## **Access Denied: The Growing Conflict Between Fishing, Hunting and Energy Development on Federal Lands**

Hunting and fishing have long been beloved pastimes for generations of Americans, providing millions the opportunity to experience the beauty and bounty of our vast nation. To the dismay of outdoor enthusiasts nationwide, the Administration's unprecedented drive to expand oil and gas development has restricted the public's ability to enjoy these federal lands, which are owned by all Americans. It has also wrecked havoc on the many irreplaceable wildlife species that make these lands their homes.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2005 that the number of drilling permits approved by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) more than tripled between 1999 and 2004, up from only 1,803 permits to 6,399 permits. Public lands managed by the BLM and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have been particularly affected, with BLM staff reporting that they have faced pressure to cater to the oil and gas industry by streamlining the permitting process – a move that comes at great cost to wildlife and wildlands.

Additionally, while the industry frequently makes the argument that there has been a decrease in the amount of federal land available for drilling, the reality is that millions of acres of already-leased lands are not being used. For example, the BLM issued 6,130 drilling permits nationwide in 2004, but the oil and gas industry drilled on only 2,702 wells, creating a surplus of more than 3,000 unused drilling permits.

In this apparent rush to approve permits, Environmental Impact Assessments, planning, science, inspections, and public transparency have been swept aside. In fact, the GAO found that BLM employees were spending an increased amount of time processing drilling applications, thus compromising the agency's ability to fulfill its vital environmental protection responsibilities.

Nationwide, the oil and gas industry currently holds more than 36 million acres of land under lease for development. The vast majority of this acreage is located in Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. These places are also home to unique fish and wildlife species, many central to hunting and angling, including mule deer, elk, pronghorn, sage grouse, prairie chickens and cutthroat trout.

The Department of the Interior, the federal agency entrusted with ensuring the responsible use and maintenance of our nation's public lands, has a longstanding duty

to balance competing interests for the use of these lands. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) reinforces that responsibility, and mandates that the agency must manage public lands "in a manner which recognizes the Nation's need for domestic sources of minerals, food, timber, and fiber."

However, the law also prescribes that in doing so, the government must "protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archeological values." The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 further details that no form of development should cause permanent impairment to the public's land.

Despite vast abuses by the executive branch, many state governments, including the Colorado State House, are working to foster a greater balance between energy development and natural resource preservation. At the federal level, the House Natural Resources Committee, under the direction of Chairman Nick J. Rahall, began conducting long overdue oversight of energy development on federal lands in March 2007. During a hearing on the topic, expert witnesses, including lifelong hunters and anglers, shared perspectives and suggestions for dealing with this growing problem that is affecting citizens across the country. Hearing testimony and additional detail can be viewed on the Committee's Web site at <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov>.

Responsible energy development and preservation of our nation's natural gifts must go hand-in-hand in order to ensure future generations are able to continue enjoying open land, unique wildlife, and access to those places they rightfully own.