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Drilling the heart out of the West

J. Robb Brady
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In the past five years, the Bush administration has leased 35 million acres of federal land for oil and gas drilling — the equivalent of 15 Yellowstone National Parks.

It's wrecking the West.

It's violating the law — courts have held the government ignored the National Environmental Policy Act's requirement to weigh environmental consequences of the leases.

And this policy isn't producing energy independence. The U.S. Geological Survey's rough inventory for the entire West adds up to about 8 billion barrels of oil.

A new documentary film, "A Land Out of Time," has poignantly captured how the government is squandering public land in a reckless stampede to find oil that is estimated to cover less than 18 months of this nation's consumption.

Directed by Mark Harvey, winner of the National Outdoor Book Award, and produced and written by Laurel Garrett of Aspen, Colo., the film is based on New York Times reporter Timothy Egan's accounts of overzealous drilling in the West.

Eastern Idahoans need only look across the border to Wyoming, where Pinedale is now getting the treatment. Although the film includes shots of the Pinedale area, it shows that this drilling blitz is threatening the West's last best places as well — Wyoming's Red Desert, Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, Colorado's Roan Plateau, Utah's canyon country, and New Mexico's Valle Vidal and Otero Mesa.

More than 100,000 acres already have been drilled from Montana to New Mexico. Plans are under way to immediately drill another 100,000 acres.

Some of that's on hold. Citing violations of the nation's environmental laws, federal courts have delayed some leasing in Utah and Alaska. The film further alleges that when the public voice is sought in public hearings — with thousands of people urging a "conservation-first" approach — the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service proceed as if the hearings never took place.

And where is this getting us?

Instead of this frenzy to chew up our public land, why not accelerate the currently slow pace of building new, advanced nuclear reactors?

Why not pursue alternatives, from wind power to coated solar panels? Even, if possible, clean coal?

All these alternatives preserve special public land, combat global warming and start us toward obtaining a new energy policy.

Most importantly, this new documentary asks the appropriate question: "Just who is in charge of our public lands — the American people or the oil and gas industry?"

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