

## E&E Greenwire

### Forest Service to ease curbs on leasing and development

Heather Richards, E&E News reporter

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The Forest Service will publish a proposed rule tomorrow easing its 20-year-old oil and gas regulations, sparking complaints from environmentalists who say it represents a fossil fuel giveaway on American grasslands and forests.

The service says its proposal would "clarify procedures, reduce redundancy and promote consistency" with sister agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, which currently oversees the majority of federal onshore oil and gas activities, from leasing to reclamation.

The rule would remove, for example, a Forest Service administrative review before grasslands and forests it oversees can be leased for oil and gas activities by BLM, a process the rule deems "duplicative."

The rule, first announced in 2018, is scheduled to be published tomorrow in the *Federal Register* and could reorient the leasing and development approach in oil-heavy areas overseen by the Forest Service.

Some 2,700 oil and gas leases, or 1.6 million acres of national forest and grassland, are currently producing hydrocarbons, the proposed rule notes. The revisions are not expected to have an impact on current rates of oil and gas production on national forest tracts.

But conservationists reacted with scorn today following the proposed rule's pre-publication.

They argue that the Forest Service updates represent more of the energy-first priorities espoused by the Trump administration and eschew public participation while weakening the agency's ability to constrain or regulate oil development on the lands it manages.

"The administration really outdid itself with a proposal that has the Forest Service walking away from its responsibilities for managing our national forests and grassland while closing the door on public oversight," Nada Culver, vice president of public lands and senior policy counsel for the National Audubon Society, said in a statement.

"This is not just a conservation issue, it's putting our communities at risk."