



# NEWS RELEASE

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**USDA FOREST SERVICE PROPOSES IMPROVED ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS  
FOR SMALL OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**  
*Proposal would reduce unnecessary red tape and delay while keeping  
environmental protection for national forests and grasslands*

WASHINGTON, Dec. 12, 2005 – U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service today announced a proposal to improve the environmental review process for oil and gas exploration and development projects under federal lease in national forests and grasslands. Public comments are being invited on the proposal for 60 days.

The proposal would allow local forest and grassland units to use a categorical exclusion when approving surface uses, such as road access, drill pad construction and pipeline installation, for oil and gas exploration and development under federal lease.

“Our forest managers have reviewed similar oil and gas projects over the last five years and have learned that projects of this scale do not carry significant environmental effects to human health or the environment,” said Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. “This proposal is a result of that review as well as the agency’s commitment to energy conservation in our national forest and grasslands.”

Projects under this proposed regulation could not include more than up to a mile each of new and reconstructed road, three miles of pipeline and four drill sites. Currently, these types of projects require an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS), which can take six months or longer to complete. This proposal would allow the environmental review process to be completed in about two months.

The proposal would apply only to activities where there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the project, such as significant adverse effects on threatened and endangered species or their designated critical habitat, wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, wetlands, and archeological or historic sites.

Public involvement opportunities would not be limited in any way under this action. Individuals would continue to have an opportunity to be involved in project planning on oil and gas leasing projects prior to their approval.

Categorical exclusions are defined as categories of actions that do not have a significant effect on the environment and therefore, do not require an EA or EIS. They are an existing tool provided for under the National Environmental Policy Act that has been used for decades on a broad range of land management activities.

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Visit [www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us) to view the Federal Register notice, which includes instructions on how to send public comments.

The Forest Service manages approximately 193 million surface acres located in 42 states and Puerto Rico. While the U.S. Department of the Interior is the chief federal entity that oversees energy activity on public lands, the Forest Service administers more than 4,600 leases on approximately 4.6 million sub-surface acres in national forests and grasslands. National forests and grasslands in 25 states hold numerous energy resources, including coal, oil and gas, geothermal, hydropower, solar, wind and biomass.

This categorical exclusion may be subject to the Eastern District of California court ruling, *Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck*. Therefore, oil and gas projects using this categorical exclusion may be required to notice the project to the public, and provide public comment and appeal opportunities.

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