

OPINION

OPED: We fought to protect Aurora Reservoir area from drilling. Now the feds are coming

‘There is no shortage of places to drill. There is a shortage of places where hundreds of thousands of people get their drinking water’



by Andrew Pinkowitz, Guest Columnist

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For those of us living near the Aurora Reservoir and in the Southeast Aurora area, we know what it’s like to fight for our neighborhood. For the better part of the last year, hundreds of us have shown up — at public hearings, in comment boxes, in commission chambers — to push back against plans to drill 32 new fracking wells less than a mile from our homes, our schools, and the reservoir that supplies drinking water to more than 400,000 people. We came with our kids, and I brought my son. We came with data. We came with concern and with hope. And in December, we won a partial victory when [state regulators voted 4-1 to delay the State Sunlight/Long development plan](#) and send the company back to find a less dangerous location.

But now the federal government has reminded us that when we push one door back, sometimes another swings open.

In March and then again in June, the Bureau of Land Management plans to offer up our public lands for oil companies to lease, and both lease sales include parcels in Arapahoe County — right near the Aurora Reservoir, the Binney Water Purification Facility, the Arapahoe County Fairgrounds, and the neighborhoods where thousands of families live.

These public lands belong to us, and the BLM is getting ready to hand them over to the oil and gas industry, despite clear local opposition to leasing lands adjacent to the Aurora Reservoir.

Here’s the thing about federal leasing: once a company secures a lease, the door for development is essentially open. It becomes incredibly difficult — legally and practically — to stop drilling. The lease is the critical moment. After that, we’re playing defense on their terms.

The BLM's mandate is to manage public lands for multiple use, for the benefit of all Americans. But somewhere along the way, "all Americans" has been quietly replaced with "whoever nominated this land for oil and gas leasing." It wasn't the people of Aurora and Centennial who asked for this. It wasn't the families in Southshore or the parents dropping their kids off at the four schools within a mile of these proposed operations.

And we're not the only ones concerned. The BLM received comments on the upcoming March sale from various stakeholders and public agencies across the state. The Environmental Protection Agency submitted recommendations for how the BLM should approach leasing lands near the Aurora Reservoir, including a call for the BLM to engage local stakeholders on potential impacts from leasing in this area. It is clear that we are the ones who know this community best, and who have the most to lose from harmful development taking place right on our doorsteps. Our concerns are real, and they matter.

I have a young child. We built our life in Southeast Aurora because I wanted a good school for him, a place to play outside, and clean air. I didn't move here to watch the federal government auction off the land around us to the highest bidder. The BLM manages 245 million acres of public land in this country. There is no shortage of places to drill. There is a shortage of places where hundreds of thousands of people get their drinking water.

The comment period for the June sale closes March 13th. That's not a lot of time.

If you live anywhere near the Aurora Reservoir — or if you just think the federal government should be responsive to the people who actually live near these lands instead of rubber-stamping whatever industry wants — go to the [BLM's ePlanning website](#) and leave a comment. Tell the agency to take action to protect our communities and to remove lands in Arapahoe County from its upcoming sales.

We showed up for the state process and it made a difference. Let's show up for this one, too.

Andrew Pinkowitz is a resident of Centennial.

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