

Obama Administration Moves Onshore Oil and Gas Lease Auctions Online To Stymie ‘Keep It In The Ground’ Protests

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On August 30, the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) [announced](#) that it would utilize Congress’ blessing, given to it in the form of [passed legislation](#), to proceed with online bidding for oil and gas located on U.S. public lands.

The industry push to make online bidding the norm — as opposed to standard in-person, oral bidding — began with a [fervorous pitch in 2009](#) in reaction to the “[Bidder 70](#)” civil disobedience action of activist Tim DeChristopher at an auction in Utah. It has culminated seven years later in reaction to another movement, this one involving the U.S. environmental movement at-large and not just a single person, otherwise known as the [Keep It The Ground campaign](#).

Back in 2009, citing DeChristopher indirectly in a U.S. Department of Interior Office of Inspector General [report](#), the BLM oversaw an online bidding pilot project to test out the internet bidding technology of a company named EnergyNet. EnergyNet, which holds online bids for oil and gas in multiple state jurisdictions, has [lobbied](#) the federal government for over a decade to move toward online bidding.



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PR, Lobbying Campaign

As of late, another industry-funded group — the [Western Energy Alliance](#) (WEA), of which [EnergyNet sits as a member](#) — has launched an [aggressive public relations campaign](#) to “[end the circus](#)” of protests outside of BLM oil and gas bids and move toward online bidding. EnergyNet will [conduct](#) an online-based bid for oil and gas on U.S. public lands [on September 20](#).

“If protesters disrupt a lease sale, we suggest BLM hold additional auctions online within that same quarter,” WEA [proclaims](#) on its website. “Online auctions also have added cost-savings benefits as venues and security personnel do not have to be enlisted to handle potentially unruly crowds.”

[WEA](#) and [EnergyNet](#) share the same federal-level lobbyist, Tim Stewart, whose [brother](#) Chris is a Republican U.S. Representative for Utah. Their [nephew](#) Cody Stewart is an energy aide for Utah’s Republican Governor Gary Herbert, who recently served as Chairman of

the [Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission](#).

Furthermore, [Spencer Kimball](#) — a staff member on the Federal Lands Subcommittee of the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee — formerly worked for WEA as a Manager of Government Affairs. Tim Stewart formerly [served as Chief of Staff](#) for the House Natural Resources Committee.

In a [press release](#), WEA lobbyist Kathleen Sgamma praised the BLM’s online bidding decision.

“We’re pleased BLM is moving forward with online oil and natural gas lease auctions to take advantage of well-established technology,” she said. “Transitioning auctions from in-person to online will enable BLM to meet its obligations under existing law, reduce administrative costs, and eliminate disruptions from Keep-It-in-the-Ground protesters.”

Offshore Bill, Dueling Lawsuits

Congressional legislation is also [moving along](#) which would push Interior’s Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) to transition to online bidding for offshore oil and gas in federal waters, again [in reaction](#) to Keep It In The Ground. In August, BOEM [held its auction](#) of 23.8 million acres of oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico online.

“They are trying to hide from our movement,” Blake Kopcho of the Center for Biological Diversity [recently told Earth Island Journal](#). “We have shown up at every BLM and BOEM fossil fuel auction over the last year since we launched this campaign. And I think the [Obama] administration really dislikes the attention that we are bringing to the fact that, in the emerging climate crisis, the federal government continues to offer up our public lands and waters for pennies on the acre to the most profitable industry in the history of the world to continue to burn fossil fuels.”

Physicians for Social Responsibility and WildEarth Guardians filed a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) [lawsuit](#) on August 25 against the BLM for not “properly analyzing, at the programmatic or project level, the ensuing direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts to our climate” the leasing of over 379,950 acres of U.S. public lands located in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming.

Meanwhile, despite winning its push for online bidding for onshore oil and gas, WEA filed its own [lawsuit](#) two weeks earlier on August 11 against the BLM for not leasing off enough oil and gas on U.S. public lands at a rapid enough pace.

“Through protests and petitions, the Keep-It-in-the-Ground movement is trying to coerce BLM into violating the law by stopping all leasing on federal lands,” Sgamma [said in a press release](#). “Yet without doing anything, activists could achieve the same goal just by leaving BLM to its own devices.”

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