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Wilderness rules restored for public lands

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Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — The Obama administration plans to reverse a Bush-era policy and make millions of undeveloped acres of land once again eligible for federal wilderness protection, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said Thursday.

Salazar said his agency will repeal 2003's so-called "No More Wilderness" policy adopted under former Interior Secretary Gale Norton. That policy stated that new areas could not be recommended for wilderness protection by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. It opened millions of acres in the Rocky Mountain region to potential commercial development.

Environmental activists have been calling on the Obama administration to restore protections for potential wilderness areas. Salazar announced Thursday that the agency will resume evaluating lands that could be designated as wilderness areas.

"Americans love the wild places where they hunt, fish, hike, and get away from it all, and they expect these lands to be protected wisely on their behalf," Salazar said in a statement.

The BLM has six months to submit a plan for new wilderness evaluations.

The 2003 policy was an out-of-court deal struck between Norton and then-Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt to remove protections for some 2.6 million acres of public land in that state.

The policy allowed oil and gas drilling, mining and other commercial uses on land under consideration as wilderness areas.

Salazar's reversal means that the BLM will set up new criteria to decide which lands should get federal wilderness designation. It doesn't affect lands already designated as wilderness areas.

Congress will still make final determinations of which lands receive permanent wilderness protection. The Interior Department says the new wilderness rules won't lead to more areas being designated as wilderness areas.

Online:
Interior Q&A on the new policy: <http://tinyurl.com/24lfw58>
