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Guerrilla Tactics at Oil-Lease Auction

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Activist Drives Up Prices With Bidding

By Karl Vick
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Monday, January 12, 2009; A02

LOS ANGELES -- Instead of joining his protester friends on the snowy sidewalk outside the [Bureau of Land Management](#) office in Salt Lake City, Tim DeChristopher took a seat inside. In a room milling with oil and gas men who knew one another by sight, he was the unknown in a red parka, registering as a bidder in an auction for the rights to drill on 149,000 acres of federal land. DeChristopher was handed a red paddle bearing the number 70.

Half an hour later, he was raising it.

"I leaned forward to one of my colleagues and said, 'This guy behind us is just running up the prices,' " said David Terry, a Salt Lake City oil-land man who routinely attends the BLM auctions. "And my friend said, 'Yeah, he's going to get stuck with a tract.' "

The [University of Utah](#) economics student got stuck with 13. Promising the federal government \$1.8 million he does not have, DeChristopher emerged holding leases on 22,000 acres in the scenic southeast corner of Utah.

He might have gone home with more had federal agents not led him out of the room after he secured the rights to a dozen parcels in a row, finally just holding his paddle over his head, even between offers. The U.S. attorney is considering charges that a spokeswoman declined to specify.

Even before DeChristopher subverted the proceedings, the Dec. 19 auction sized up as one of the most controversial during the Bush administration, whose policies critics have characterized as a bonanza for oil and gas extraction on public land. Opponents of the policies said the 35,000 drilling permits issued over the past eight years reflected the boom in petroleum prices and the administration's zeal to accommodate the oil and gas industry, even on public lands deemed "special" because of their beauty or fragility.

"This whole business of 'Drill, baby, drill' totally ignored the fact that we are a well-drilled country," said Dave Alberswerth of the [Wilderness Society](#), noting that by the count of the oil-field services company Baker Hughes, more drill rigs are operating inside the United States than in the rest of the world combined. "BLM's oil and gas program has been just out of control."

The parcels that DeChristopher snapped up stand near two national parks and a national monument that environmentalists and the [National Park Service](#) warned might be endangered by drilling. The outrage, which rivaled the outcry over the BLM decision to lease atop Colorado's majestic Roan Plateau, was aggravated by the timing: The agency announced the Utah auction on Nov. 4 -- Election Day. Environmental groups answered with administrative filings and news conferences, including a

[National Press Club](#) event featuring [Robert Redford](#).

DeChristopher wanted to do more.

"I've been an environmentalist for pretty much all my life and done all the things that you're supposed to do that are supposed to lead toward change," DeChristopher said, accounting for action that, as he tells it, surprised even him. "I've marched and held signs. I've volunteered in national parks. I've written letters and signed petitions. I've sat down with my congressman, [Jim Matheson](#), for a long time.

"Ultimately, I felt like those things were only mildly effective. And it was having a very tiny effect on a very large problem."

The guerrilla bidding did not go down well with the oil and gas regulars. The companies recommend parcels for the BLM to sell and can hold them for decades if they prevail at the quarterly auctions.

"If we'd have put it up for a vote in the room that day," said BLM spokeswoman [Mary Wilson](#), "the other bidders might have put together a lynching party."

Among some environmentalists, however, DeChristopher was hailed as a hero. A blogger helped set up a Web site, <http://www.bidder70.org>, and a pass-along e-mail request for \$5 contributions turned into an online fund drive that, by Friday, raised the \$45,000 that DeChristopher needed to pay the BLM in the hope of retaining a claim on the leases -- and improving his odds of avoiding jail.

The West Virginia native, 27, said he raised paddle No. 70 fully aware of the implications. It took him half an hour to screw up the courage to bid, he said, and another half-hour to start winning parcels.

"It came down to, if worse came to worse, I'd go to jail," DeChristopher said. "And I decided, yeah, I could live with that. . . ."

"But seeing all the disastrous effects of climate change in our future, I didn't want to have to live with that."

His actions impressed Patrick Shea, a Salt Lake City lawyer who headed the BLM during the Clinton administration and who decided to represent DeChristopher.

"I interviewed him twice, just to make sure what I saw on the news was the real McCoy, and it was," Shea said. "He's really a very bright, upstanding and principled individual who was rightly upset about some of these leases being offered."

Along with a criminal defense attorney, Shea is working behind the scenes to persuade federal authorities to recognize DeChristopher's bidding as a well-intentioned political, rather than criminal, act.

"I didn't want to see somebody with that kind of virtue mangled by a Kafkaesque kind of system," Shea said. "I think responsible civil disobedience has been forgotten since the '60s and '70s."

If so, one reason might be reforms rooted in the activism of that era. Full-time advocates pointed out

that the BLM auction was originally scheduled for two years earlier but that lawsuits from environmental groups forced the agency to first complete management plans required by federal statutes aimed at protecting the environment.

"It was a decision we got in August 2006 that held up the BLM for this long," said Steve Bloch, conservation director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "The fact that it took a sale at the last minute of the last hour is in large part due to the efforts we've been making."

Protests from the National Park Service also had an effect, persuading the BLM to pare its original offering of 360,000 acres by more than half. Bloch noted that all the parcels DeChristopher bought were among the 80 that conservation groups specifically sought to preserve. But the student said there was no particular strategy to his bids.

"It was more just based on me watching one parcel after another end up in the hands of developers, watching all those parcels go by and knowing that I could have stopped it," he said. In fact, the whole notion of registering as a bidder was something that DeChristopher said more or less popped into his head.

"I used to work for a company that one of its mottos was 'plan with spontaneity,' and that's how I approached this," he said.

By chance, the auction was held the same day as DeChristopher's final exam in his Current Economic Problems course; the test happened to include a question referring to the sale. It asked whether the final bids paid by oil and gas companies would reflect the "true cost" of the leases.

"And the answer they were looking for was 'No,' " DeChristopher said, listing a string of other costs that would flow from petroleum extraction, including the costs of health care and global-warming mitigation.

"That question was just something already in the back of my mind when I was driving up those oil prices, to reflect a little more of the true costs," he said.

Shea said the BLM appears divided on how to deal with DeChristopher. "If the hawks prevail, it will flow into a prosecution," he said. "If the doves prevail, it will be some kind of community service, I would hope."

DeChristopher, meanwhile, said he plans to hold on to the 22,000 acres as long as possible, if only to register impatience with what he sees as compromises that accommodate continued reliance on petroleum.

"I'd say the forces out to destroy the planet on the Bush-Cheney side have been fighting a lot harder than those out to protect it," he said.

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