

## Energy Insider by William Engdahl

### The Carolina wilderness story

*The U.S. Forestry Service hints at a shift away from Bergland's mineral lock-up.*

George Olson, Supervisor of National Forests for North Carolina, has recently announced what can be a possible improvement in recent federal land use policy. Late last month, Olson, in charge of the Agriculture Department's Forestry Service in what could be one of the nation's most mineral-rich regions, the Appalachian Overthrust, told local press, "I made the decision today that we should consent to leases" for oil and gas exploration permits. A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey has indicated that a vast untapped belt of potential oil and gas resources lies along the range from Pennsylvania state down to Alabama.

Olson has recommended approval for exploration in the region to the Federal Bureau of Land Management. Following release of the U.S.G.S. study, AMOCO, the nation's largest domestic oil producer, applied for exploration leases on 220,000 acres of federal lands in the Pisgah National Forest and Nantahala National Forest in western North Carolina. A company spokesman announced that they would not have applied for the leases "if we didn't have hopes of finding marketable hydrocarbons".

This generally unheralded announcement is worth noting for several reasons. In my Sept. 2 column, I devoted space to a possible precedent-setting legal challenge by a group in North Carolina against the alarming federal trend

of using the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation, or RARE II, process to perpetually lock up millions of acres of land rich with uranium and minerals.

The recent AMOCO decision is an indication of opposition to this policy that is beginning to yield some hopeful signs. By at least one calculation, we already have been forbidden from even prospecting and surveying land acreage equivalent to 25 of the 27 states east of the Mississippi. The Carter administration has locked up some 120 million acres of oil-rich Alaska lands pending a final decision by Congress on permanent wilderness designation. The eastern wilderness fight is especially interesting because the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1975 forbids Bergland from doing what he has done with great abandon in western states.

Yet, as the North Carolina case correctly protests, Bergland has chosen to ignore law and forbid any exploratory activity in millions of acres designated for "further study." But the 1975 law calls for "evaluation of resources before there is withdrawal." Bergland until now has used the "further study" category to prevent such evaluation, and administratively lock up millions of acres of rich lands.

Apparently the evaluation of the U.S. Geological Survey was too embarrassing for Bergland. The acid test will be whether the federal Bureau of Land Management over-

rules Olson's determination.

I recently talked with a local attorney in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Hamilton C. Horton, Jr., who has been actively involved in the legal fight to reverse the government's neanderthal policies regarding wilderness exploration. Commenting on the significance of the recent Forestry Service decision, Mr. Horton told me, "We are still not out of the woods" on this issue, although "this is the only place in the country that I know of where the Forestry Service has made such a ruling" in recent years. Horton attributes this to a powerful regional organizing job carried out by groups willing to fight a seemingly endless tangle of federal restrictions on energy development.

Bergland's office in particular has increasingly taken to overriding the experience of seasoned professionals such as Olson in favor of new staffers with a bias toward the no-growth philosophies of groups such as the Sierra Club. In fact, the current head of the U.S. Forestry Service, Ruppert Cutler, was previously a leading ideologue of the Wilderness Society, the anti-growth exponent of such liberal foundations as the Atlantic Richfield Foundation and the Rockefeller Family Fund.

Horton cautions that the restrictions placed on AMOCO's efforts to find oil and gas in this lucrative basin may be hamstrung to the point of absurdity. One proponent of "pristine wilderness" has seriously proposed that any exploration in such study areas be conducted under such restrictive conditions as bringing oil drilling rigs into the forest on sleds or landing them by helicopter to avoid "denting" the wild undergrowth.