

NEWS RELEASE
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US Forest Service Drops Appeal for Drilling Plan Near Mason Tract World Class Trout Stream Protected

In a major victory for anglers, hikers and canoeists, the US Forest Service has dropped its appeal of a Federal Court decision to protect the Mason Tract and nearby Au Sable River from oil and gas drilling. The Au Sable River is one of the world's premier blue ribbon trout streams.

The agency action follows a decision issued by Michigan Eastern District Federal Court Judge David M. Lawson in July. The decision came in response to concerns raised by the Sierra Club, Anglers of the Au Sable and Tim Mason about the Forest Service plan to allow Savoy Energy Company to clearcut and drill on National Forest land adjacent to the Mason Tract and within earshot of the river.

"Clearly some considered oil and gas drilling more important than the solitude required by hunters, anglers and hikers in this spectacular area," said Marvin Roberson, Sierra Club Forest Ecologist. "Given the importance of this place to the people of the state of Michigan, we applaud this decision to abandon the appeal."

The Forest Service failed to adequately consider the environmental impacts and alternatives to address concerns including noise and habitat destruction in its plan. As a result the court enjoined the Forest Service from engaging in any activities. Savoy Energy Company was denied a last minute attempt to intervene in the case on appeal in front of the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals. The decision by the Forest Service to drop its appeal leaves the lower court decision and injunction in place and protects the Au Sable River from destructive drilling.

"This portion of the Au Sable is the most pristine trout stream in the lower peninsula" said Rusty Gates, President of the Anglers of the Au Sable. "People come here from all over the world to enjoy the beauty and solitude afforded by this river. We're glad to see that it remains protected"

The Mason Tract was established in 1955 when Tim Mason's grandfather, George Mason, bequeathed a 1,500 acre parcel with eleven miles of frontage on the South Branch of the Au Sable River to the State of Michigan. George Mason's gift was conditioned on maintaining the pristine condition of the Tract. Today, the Mason Tract covers approximately 4,500 acres, but the oil and gas rights under the Tract were at least in part owned by the federal government and were leased by the Bureau of Land Management.

According to Tim Mason, who represented the living Mason heirs in this suit, "this recent development will allow my Grandfathers vision to carry on and provide people an opportunity to enjoy the quiet solitude he found so therapeutic and relaxing".

"This unique gift that he left to the people of Michigan and this country has provided recreational hikers, skiers, canoeists and dedicated fishermen and sportsmen an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors in ways that are rare and hard to find these days. On behalf of our Grandfather and the rest of the Mason family we are grateful for the efforts of the Sierra Club, The Anglers of the Au Sable and all of the volunteers that made this happen."

No drilling is allowed on the Mason Tract itself however oil and gas could potentially be retrieved through Forest Service lands abutting the Mason Tract. Savoy Energy Company proposed to set up a drilling platform in an old growth portion of the South Branch Area of the Huron Manistee National Forest. The drilling platform would be near enough to impact the Mason Tract and the only two track trail that leads to the Mason Chapel within the Tract.

The conservationists were represented by attorney Marianne Dugan of Portland., Oregon, one of the most successful environmental attorneys in the nation.

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