

CASE IN FOCUS

Preliminary Victory in Strategic Sierra Club Litigation Advancing Club's Top Priority Initiatives

Tom Brokaw once said, "If fishing is religion, then fly-fishing is high-church." Apparently, the Bush administration didn't get the memo – they're proving once again that they find nothing sacred. It's bad enough that the administration is moving forward with plans to drill the Arctic, off our coasts, and other pristine areas around the country; but when the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recently decided to exploit the very river that launched Trout Unlimited, they violated a key principle: Don't mess with sportsmen!

Just ask Rusty Gates, who's been fishing the Au Sable River for over 40 years: "We have hundreds of anglers up in arms over this, and we'll be darned if they're going to ruin one of the most special places we've got left." Rusty – a former "Angler of the Year" from *Rod and Reel* magazine – knows the river like the back of his hand. Not only does he run a local lodge, he leads fly-fishing trips for teenage cancer patients so they can experience the true beauty of one of the Midwest's most precious places.

The bad news is that the Bush administration ignored thousands of comments from people like Rusty all over the country calling for protection of this world-class trout stream. The good news is that Rusty and other Au Sable anglers aren't going to take this one sitting down. They've teamed up with the Sierra Club on a lawsuit to block the drilling and preserve the Au Sable's legacy.

Today, a federal judge issued an emergency injunction blocking an energy company from clearing land in preparation for the drilling until a final decision is reached in the case. Rejecting the administration's claim that drilling this special place would cause no environmental harm, the judge issued his ruling immediately, without holding a hearing.

The drilling would take place on National Forest lands, in a specially-designated area of old growth forest, to reach potential oil and gas deposits underlying the Mason Tract -- a 5300-acre parcel that was donated to the state of Michigan in the 1930's by prominent industrialist George Mason on the condition that the land be kept in its pristine state. George Mason's grandson, Tim Mason, has joined the Sierra Club and Anglers of the Au Sable in the lawsuit to protect this special place.

The Sierra Club's efforts are strongly supported by the local community. At one public meeting in this remote rural area, approximately 500 people from a town of 3,000 showed up to speak out against the proposed drilling. The Director of the local Chamber of Commerce also showed up "to echo," as he put it, the concerns of the Sierra Club. Michigan Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow and local Congressman Bart Stupak have also sent letters opposing the drilling. And our local activists report that the once-omnipresent "Sportsmen for Bush" bumper stickers in this highly conservative area have virtually disappeared.

Stay tuned for more developments as this case unfolds.