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Comments: The leasing of federal land within Conecuh National Forest for oil and gas development should not be authorized due to the scarcity of public land in the southeastern United States. The Southeast has far fewer federally protected areas compared to other regions of the country, making every acre of public land a rare and valuable resource for outdoor recreation, ecological research, and preservation of natural heritage. Authorizing industrial activity such as drilling would fragment these limited natural landscapes, disrupt recreational access, and diminish the forest's role as a refuge from urban and agricultural development. Once disturbed, the unique character and biodiversity of Conecuh National Forest could be irreversibly altered, depriving future generations of the chance to experience it in its natural state.

Conecuh National Forest also harbors a variety of protected and at-risk species whose survival depends on the integrity of its habitats. The longleaf pine ecosystem, already reduced to a fraction of its historical range, provides critical shelter for species like the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and the threatened gopher tortoise. Oil and gas operations bring with them noise, pollution, and habitat destruction, which can disrupt breeding, feeding, and migration patterns of these sensitive species. Introducing such industrial activity into a federally managed conservation area would run counter to the legal and ethical commitments to protect biodiversity. Protecting Conecuh from leasing not only safeguards these vulnerable species but also upholds the broader principle that our nation's limited public lands should remain a sanctuary for wildlife and a living legacy for all Americans.