

Congressmen solicit feedback on Roan Plateau management plan  
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DENVER (AP) - With the final management plan pending for western Colorado's Roan Plateau, two members of the state's congressional delegation want to hear from area groups on balancing environmental concerns with plans to tap the landmark's rich mineral deposits.

Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall, both Democrats, have invited area elected officials, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and environmental and wildlife groups to a Feb. 22 meeting in Glenwood Springs.

"They'll get input from folks about the next step to take on the Roan Plateau," said Lawrence Pacheco, Udall's spokesman.

There are wells on private land atop the roughly 9,000-foot plateau, which straddles Garfield and Rio Blanco counties.

Joe Neuhof of the Colorado Environmental Coalition said his group will present alternatives to drilling natural gas wells on federal land atop the plateau. He said the group believes the management plan doesn't address some of the public's concerns and thinks federal legislation protecting the area would be appropriate.

Area communities and conservation and hunting groups oppose drilling on top of the plateau, about 180 miles west of Denver. Salazar has also called for keeping development off the federal land on top.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management's plan released in September would allow wells on top with restrictions intended to minimize impacts on wildlife and the environment. Spokesman David Boyd said the BLM is reviewing formal protests of the proposal and hopes to issue a final decision by summer.

The Roan Plateau, along with New Mexico's Valle Vidal and northern Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, has been singled out by conservation and hunting and fishing groups as a spot that should be off-limits to energy development. The plateau is in one of the hot spots of escalating natural gas development in the Rockies.

"Sportsmen aren't going to have a place to hunt and fish if things keep going like they're going, and the Roan is an example of that," Trout Unlimited spokesman Chris Hunt said.

Trout Unlimited supported legislation banning drilling on the Rocky Mountain Front in west-central Montana and northern New Mexico's Valle Vidal, a valley in the Carson National Forest. The energy company Questar E&P donated leases it held on federal land on the Rocky Mountain Front to Trout Unlimited.

The Roan Plateau generates an estimated \$5 million a year for the local economy from hunting, fishing and wildlife watching, according to the Colorado Division of Wildlife. It's home to elk, deer, mountain lions, peregrine falcons, bears, native Colorado trout and other wildlife that draw tourists and hunters from across the country.

The plateau could also provide enough natural gas for 4 million homes for the next 20 years, according to the Colorado Oil and Gas Association trade group.

Energy companies and supporters of development say that federal legislation transferring the Roan Plateau from the Department of Energy to the Interior Department specified that the resources remain available for development.

Environmentalists say that not all the land has to be developed.

The plateau was known as the Naval Oil Shale Reserve, first set aside during World War II to mine fuel from oil shale. The BLM recently leased land in the area for pilot oil shale projects.

BLM's plan covers the 73,602 acres of federal land on the plateau. The agency's 20-year management plan calls for oil and gas development on top of the plateau in stages and clustered wells to limit disturbance of the land. One company would oversee operations, including other companies' wells, to reduce the number of roads and construction needed in each area.

The agency's preliminary plan proposed deferring drilling on the top until 80 percent of the wells below the plateau's rim were developed \_ a process estimated to take 16 years.

Discussions with other agencies, including the Colorado Division of Wildlife and area cities and counties, prompted the BLM to fashion the recommendation it made in the final plan. State wildlife officials said they worried that delaying development on the top would intensify drilling on the bottom, a crucial winter range for elk and deer.

The BLM projects development of 193 well pads and 1,570 wells, including 13 pads and 210 wells on top. Several wells can be drilled from one pad.

The Colorado Oil and Gas Association has said that clustering development on top and putting one company in charge of operations will drive down the value of the leases.

"The single operator concept is a problem. It creates a situation where the project is not as desirable to some operators," said Greg Schnacke, the association's executive vice president.