

Roan Plateau: A Colorado landscape and legacy worth saving

- Roan Plateau is home to pure strains of Colorado River cutthroat trout and species of plants that are known to occur only here. According to the BLM:

For the relatively small size of the geographic area, the [Roan Plateau] is extremely species rich. There are only three areas of similar size in Colorado that contain such a richness of rare species . . . Although the [plateau] is clearly of comparable biological significance, it is the only area of the four that does not enjoy protective status¹.

- Roan Plateau is a source of local pride, the scenic backdrop for area residents, and popular recreational lands. The City of Rifle wrote in a September 2005 letter to BLM, that:

The City of Rifle is in opposition to any oil/gas or other mineral development on top of the Roan Plateau. It is the City's position that the area above the rim of the Plateau should be reserved and managed for significant historical uses, which include recreation, hunting, livestock grazing, ranching, etc. We feel no plan can make such uses compatible with natural gas exploration. Throughout the west it has been well documented how natural gas activities negatively impact those uses we wish to protect and preserve; uses important to local economy and culture.

- Hunting on Roan Plateau brings in about \$5 million every year to Garfield County. Other popular activities include hiking, scenic drives, mountain biking, and family campouts.
- In 1998-2000, BLM performed a wilderness inventory on the Roan Plateau, and found three separate areas that met the qualifications for wilderness.



Colorado's "Little Yosemite." Roan Plateau's East Fork Canyon

Timeline of Roan Plateau Planning Process

When the BLM set out to write the Roan Plateau Resource Management Plan (RMP), the November 2000 Notice of Intent (NOI) pledged to craft a "community-supported" plan.² In the fall of 2002, the BLM released a set of preliminary alternatives, asking for comments on the range of preliminary alternatives, as well as on specific alternatives. Public input strongly favored a single choice, Alternative F. Of the six preliminary alternatives, Alt. F included the strongest protections, and would manage Roan Plateau to preserve its wilderness-quality and roadless lands; safeguard its sensitive species; and, maintain its recreational opportunities.³ In a 2002 letter to the BLM, the City of Rifle noted that:⁴

"What we keep hearing, more or less, is to keep the plateau as it is" Glenwood BLM official, 2002

After review of [the preliminary alternatives] Council generally found Alternative F most preferable. . . .The [final plan] needs to state clearly that unique environmental features exist on the Plateau and said features warrant maximum protection.

In fact, at this time, every Garfield County municipality supported Alternative F. Over 11,000 citizens sent comments in support of this middle-ground plan.⁵ Newspapers across the state endorsed this approach for these popular lands. Then, in 2003 BLM dropped preliminary alternative F from further consideration, reversed its pledge to consider Wilderness Study Area protections for the Roan's qualifying public lands, and signaled its intent to open most or all of the area to oil and gas leasing.

¹Glenwood Springs Resource Area Final SEIS, January 1999.

²Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS...for the Roan Plateau Area, U.S. Federal Register, November 2000

³Comparison of Six Preliminary Alternatives: Roan Plateau RMPA," BLM GSFO, October 2002

⁴RE: Roan Plateau Resource Management Plan Amendment Review of Preliminary Alternatives, Letter from City of Rifle, November 8, 2002

⁵"Enviros complain about BLM's procedure on Roan Comments," Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, February 14, 2003

In November 2004, BLM released its Draft Resource Management Plan and EIS. None of the Draft Plan alternatives achieved the management objectives set out in the community-supported preliminary alternative F, and local communities and citizens across the state again raised their objections to BLM's decision to turn over these popular public lands to the oil and gas industry. During the comment period on the Draft Plan, local communities passed a second series of resolutions supporting a compromise plan (the "Community Alternative") that would allow for large volumes of gas to be produced from the Planning Area, but would manage the public lands on top and critical habitat at the base for other values and uses. By the time the comment period closed on the Draft Plan, nearly 75,000 comments were received, with 98.5% in support of strong protections for Roan Plateau and opposed to drilling the public lands on top. No other RMP in Colorado BLM history has received more than 3% of this level of comment.

After the Draft Plan comment period closed, BLM held a series of meetings with its cooperating agencies—the cities of Rifle and Glenwood Springs, Garfield and Rio Blanco Counties, and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. Through these meetings a separate plan was crafted, one that the public was never given the opportunity to consider, and this became the proposed action in the proposed Final Resource Management Plan and EIS, issued in September 2006. Although this plan contains some innovative features, many observers and local governments did not feel it went far enough to protect Roan Plateau or offer the type of community-supported plan long proposed by area communities.

In September 2006, BLM released its proposed Final Plan for Roan Plateau. Just prior to the release of the Final Plan, local governments passed a third set of resolutions again urging BLM to award Roan Plateau the protection it deserves and which the public overwhelmingly supports. Although no comment period was offered on the Final Plan, local governments tried again, with area mayors endorsing a letter written by the City of Glenwood Springs urging that BLM reconsider its proposed plan to lease the entire Planning Area for oil and gas development, and asking for additional public comment on the new plan that came from the cooperating-agencies meetings.

BLM's Proposed Plan for Roan Plateau

Although large volumes of natural gas exist throughout the region, the Roan Plateau itself is recognized as a "biological hotspot" for its unusual diversity of important species, and as a backcountry paradise for its unique recreational opportunities. Home to pure strains of native trout, endemic plants, wildlife and raptors, old-growth Douglas fir, waterfalls and box canyons—Roan Plateau is an oasis that offers unique public and natural resources surrounded by one of America's fastest growing natural gas fields. Although many residents feel their quality-of-life may be in jeopardy, energy development in Garfield County and Western Colorado certainly is not. Approved drilling permits have increased exponentially in the past several years, with 2006 having set another all time record. Unfortunately, rather than manage for the multiple and traditional uses of Roan Plateau, BLM's proposed plan would turn much of this area into an industrial zone, pushing out other public uses.

Recreation--According to the Final EIS, "Although public comments on the Draft Plan indicated a demand for undeveloped recreation settings, the BLM has concluded "management to accommodate substantial oil and gas development precludes maintaining characteristics specific to undeveloped recreation settings." Instead, the Final Plan would manage Roan Plateau as an "extensive recreation management area," which requires recreational activities to adjust to natural gas development. FEIS at 2-14, 2-62, 4-111.

Wildlife Habitat--According to the FEIS, "outfitters and the big game they hunt will be...displaced;" and, "Some areas of high-quality wildlife habitat would be lost or permanently altered." The FEIS notes, "Some of these impacts could never be reversed, especially those that eliminate genetically unique resources...such as genetically pure Colorado River cutthroat trout." The FEIS also mentions closing the area to hunting if "crowding" becomes a problem. For discussion on wildlife impacts see FEIS at 4-44, 4-130; FEIS mentions closing the area to hunting if 'crowding' becomes a problem at 4-113.

Wilderness Quality Lands--The FEIS states that the plan's emphasis on oil and gas development "would effectively eliminate wilderness character in the three inventory units as a whole," going on to note that "opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation, naturalness, and solitude would not be preserved under the Proposed Plan." BLM acknowledges that the Planning Area includes "three areas (totaling 21,382 acres) found by BLM to contain wilderness characteristics," the results of a 1998-2000 BLM inventory (at 1-8), but notes elsewhere that no "areas [will] be managed specifically to protect and preserve wilderness values" FEIS at S-4; see also FEIS at 4-128.