

Mr. Neubecker goes to Washington

Local activist lobbies Congress to save Roan Plateau

BY GINA GUARASCIO

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When you think vacation, you might think beach, foofy umbrella drinks, steel drums, dancing, fishing, surf, sand, solace and sun.

If you're Carbondale resident Ken Neubecker, you think about wading, not in the river, but through a three volume copy of the Bureau of Land Management proposed Roan Plateau Resource Management Plan Amendment — while on vacation.

It's not that he really wants to read this incredibly sterile document, it's that he has to. Nobody's paying him to do it, but there are a lot of people getting paid in the oil and gas industry to lobby for drilling. So he feels compelled to lobby against it. Not so much for himself, but for the trout.

Neubecker is the vice-president of Colorado Trout Unlimited, a volunteer gig, and an avid fisherman and outdoorsman.

So he reads the lengthy plan that is touted by the BLM as “truly innovative” and a plan that allows “strong protection for fish and wildlife habitat, scenic views, and ecologically sensitive areas — yet still allows most of the federal gas resources to be recovered beneath the 73,000-acre Roan Plateau Planning Area.” And then he writes a five page protest of the plan; one of 40 protests written after the plan came out last fall.

Neubecker said the resource management plan for the Roan Plateau ignores what so many activists, community members, mayors and town councils have been saying for nearly a decade and allows drilling on top of the Roan Plateau.

To put it lightly, he's pissed.

“It's frustrating and some people get cynical. I know people who say they just want to move to Canada or something. Hell no. I'm going to stay here and fight like hell,” said Neubecker, his words filtering through his white beard.

“You have to pay attention. Don't use that cop out, ‘I can't make a difference. They won't listen to me’. You can bet they're hearing from the paid industry lobbyists.

“Some things are too important,” he adds. “You have to pay attention to what your legislators are doing. This is a participatory democracy, not a reactionary democracy. If you

wait until you see it in the papers it's usually too late."

Time running out for Roan

Not only is Neubecker the kind of guy that will read a resource management plan on vacation, he'll also go to Washington D.C., mostly on his own dime, to visit people he doesn't even know. He'll trade in his waders for a suit and tie and plead with politicians, whoever will listen, that a couple days worth of energy is not worth the potential damage to a unique wilderness area in Colorado; especially when efficiency measures could save just as much energy as could be extracted.

Neubecker went to Washington D.C. on April 19 to testify to a congressional committee about the trout, the land and the legacy he hopes to preserve.

He explained that the Roan Plateau, located northwest of Rifle, is home to the state's highest waterfall, not to mention a couple of pure strains of native cutthroat trout and plant species that are known to occur only there; that it is called Colorado's "Little Yosemite" because of the stunning geologic formations; and that hunting on Roan Plateau brings the local economy about \$5 million every year.

Neubecker urged members of Congress to "deny funding for the Bureau of Land Management's program to lease critical fish and wildlife habitat for oil and gas drilling over the objections of the local community, sportsmen, and outfitters."

He said if the funding is allocated the BLM could start leasing the land on the top of the Roan Plateau this year.

"If (Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo.) doesn't speak up and there's no restriction in the budget, then the BLM will most likely start leasing the Roan Plateau. That's not what the local communities and citizens want or expect," said Neubecker, who explained how more than 98.5 percent of the 75,000 comments received by the BLM concerning the Roan Plateau supported strong protections. "It's like any political decision, the local agencies go along with what the administration wants."

Dueling wordsmiths

A congressional hearing with an energy subcommittee of the Natural Resources Committee on the fate of the Roan Plateau tentatively scheduled for May 4 in Glenwood Springs was canceled this week. Rep. Salazar requested the hearing, but his staff said the committee couldn't make it work.

A press release from an oil industry lobbying group, the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, blasted the hearing saying it would undermine the public process that helped draft the final management plan and it would conflict with an oil industry event in Craig the same day.

In what seems like a rhetorical battle that no one will win, the

oil industry and environmentalists are both working for what they think is best for Colorado. The IPAMS calls the unleased areas on the Roan a “tiny portion” of the plateau where gas development would be mitigated on only 350 acres at a time. Much of the Western portion of the land is already owned by the industry.

The IPAMS says drilling on the remaining acreage will bring in \$3.5 billion to Garfield County and the state of Colorado, “which would prevent the state’s impending budget shortfalls.”

“Many anti-development environmental groups oppose all energy development ... they would have you believe it’s an either/or choice: develop natural gas (on the Roan) or preserve it for other uses such as hunting and fishing,” stated a recent IPAMS press release. “That is not the decision with which we are faced — we can manage the small and temporary impacts of development while maintaining the excellent recreational opportunities this area offers.” “They make it sound like it’s just wonderful, but it’s not,” said Neubecker of the industry’s pro-drilling propaganda. “The protections are bogus. They say there has to be a buffer on the creeks. If they have a big tanker spill, do you think all that material is going to stop at the buffer? They’re thinking, ‘if we don’t get this leased before George (Bush) leaves office, we’ll never get it leased,’” said Neubecker, commenting on the industry’s insistence that the plan be finalized and approved as soon as possible.

“Right now we need to get a flood of calls into Salazar. He is the most important right now; it’s in his district,” said Neubecker,

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Carbondale resident and Colorado Trout Unlimited vice president Ken Neubecker in Washington, D.C. last month. Neubecker was in the nation's capitol to lobby Congress for protection of the Roan Plateau in western Colorado.