

# Thursday, March 9, 2006



[ENERGY & THE WEST](#)

## [New roads cut across energy-rich Roan Plateau](#)

**By Nancy Lofholm**

While conservationists await the spring release of the final federal environmental study of drilling on the Roan Plateau, energy companies are busy cutting roads to the top of its scenic shale cliffs and drilling gas wells on its private lands.

Williams Inc. is building a 4-mile road up the south side of the Roan near Parachute. That work will include blasting a 3,200-foot-long tunnel through rock at the plateau's rim. Occidental Petroleum is constructing a 6-mile road to the top just west of the Bureau of Land Management's study area, where heavy drilling-rig traffic has led to hours-long traffic jams on that area's only public-access road.

The plateau has only two public roads to the top. Both are steep, with sharp switchbacks, and not handy to some of the private drilling areas.

"The idea of the road initially is to be able to access different drilling locations we have planned. These are only leases on private property," said Williams spokeswoman Susan Alviller.

But those who have been fighting to keep drilling off the plateau, which has Douglas fir stands, hanging gardens, waterfalls and a pure strain of cutthroat trout, see the costly and difficult-to-build roads leading straight to development.

"It's hard not to look at this as a harbinger of things to come," said Pete Kolbenschlag with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. "This indicates what kind of development we can expect to see."

The final environmental impact statement is due in May and will be followed by a 30-day protest period. Gov. Bill Owens will then have 60 days to review the plan before the BLM holds a lease sale on the lands.

Both of the new private roads are due to be completed this summer. The tunnel is scheduled to open in 2007.

The new roads will access the 28 wells that have been drilled on the 19,000 acres of private plateau-top lands with private mineral rights within the BLM's study area and the dozens of wells in a busy drilling area on top of the plateau outside the study area's boundary.

Officials for both companies won't say if the roads are being built in anticipation of the possible opening

---

Advertisement

---

up of federal lands at the top of the 3,500-foot-high plateau.

The area has become a nationally watched battleground between those who would preserve its unusual ecosystem and those eager to tap into its rich reserve of an estimated 9 trillion cubic feet of gas.

Conservationists, local municipalities and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources have urged that all or most of the federal lands atop the Roan be kept off-limits to the massive surface drilling that now circles the Roan and is creeping up its base.

But energy companies are pushing for access to an area that has proved to be rich in accessible natural gas - enough to heat an estimated 2.5 million homes for 20 years.

“There is a tremendous amount of gas up there,” said David Boyd, a spokesman for the BLM.

The BLM controls mineral development on nearly 35,000 of the 54,000 acres at the top of the plateau, stretching from Rifle to DeBeque along Interstate 70. Those acres have been at the crux of debates for more than six years as the BLM has studied and proposed different scenarios for getting at the gas.

A draft plan released by the BLM in November 2004 sparked a wave of protest and suggestions on how to lessen impacts atop a hunting and recreation mecca. It has been named one of the four most biologically diverse areas on the Western Slope by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program.

Development of private wells has quietly sped up since then, quadrupling on the privately owned land in the study area.

Staff writer Nancy Lofholm can be reached at 970-256-1957 or [nlofholm@denverpost.com](mailto:nlofholm@denverpost.com).