

Let public comment on Roan drilling

A Division of Wildlife approach to oil and gas exploration might better protect the environment. But it wasn't included among BLM alternatives.

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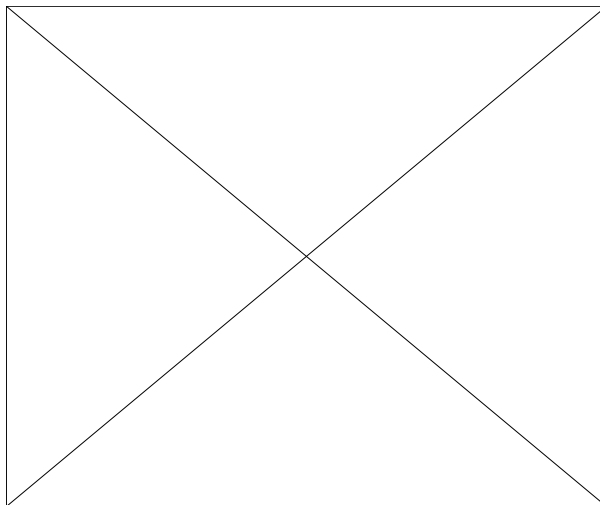
Few ongoing proposals in Western Colorado have ignited more controversy than plans to drill for oil and gas atop the Roan Plateau, which rises dramatically above the Colorado River near Rifle. Now information has surfaced that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which handles energy leasing on federal lands, may allow drill rigs on the plateau even though citizens' groups and local governments oppose doing so.

In its draft environmental impact statement, the BLM said it preferred to allow drill rigs atop the plateau only after most of the Roan's base and sides are developed for oil and gas. By delaying all-out energy production atop the plateau, the BLM thought it could reduce the environmental damage. Over the past several months, the public was invited to comment on that idea, along with three other possible scenarios for drilling in the Roan area.

This week, though, U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., said that the BLM may adopt a different plan that wasn't among the four alternatives listed in the

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environmental study. Among other things, BLM's new preference is to let drilling take place on the Roan's top at the same time drill rigs are working at the plateau's base and sides. The public should have a chance to comment on the purported fifth alternative. In a letter to new U.S. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, Salazar asked Kempthorne to delay the final EIS for 60 days to let the public comment.

Frankly, the BLM erred by not including the fifth alternative in the study - especially since the information entered the public domain months ago.

The idea came from the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, which includes the state's Division of Wildlife. The DOW is alarmed at the harm that intensive drilling is causing wild animals, so officials went looking for ways to reduce the impacts on the Roan. The information was part of a letter the state sent the BLM last autumn and was talked about at some public meetings. But the DOW's compromise wasn't included in the BLM's draft study, so the public never had a chance to comment on it.

The state's ideas might help protect the environment if the BLM leases the Roan's top. The plan would make all the energy companies that obtain leases select just one company to operate the field, thus limiting the number of roads and pipelines on the plateau. Only 200 acres could be disturbed at any time, and the field operator would have to rehabilitate the developed area before drilling the next well. Whenever geologically possible, the energy companies would have to use directional drilling.

Like Garfield County's local governments, we still oppose drilling atop the Roan. The BLM is under crushing political pressure to step up the already frenetic pace of energy drilling in the West, but the fact is energy producers are not working all the leases they already have.

If the BLM is going to allow drilling on the Roan, then the state's ideas may limit the extent of harm. However, BLM should heed Salazar's request and give the public a chance to comment on the proposal.