

Enviros say time running out for 'the next Roan Plateau'



By BOBBY MAGILL The Daily Sentinel

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CRAIG — From several thousand feet above northwest Colorado, the Vermillion Basin looks like a multihued Martian badland surrounded by a mostly unbroken expanse of unpopulated country bordering the towering cliffs of Dinosaur National Monument.

“This is the next Roan Plateau,” Wilderness Society Regional Director Suzanne Jones said of the Vermillion Basin, a wildland north of Dinosaur National Monument that the Bureau of Land Management is proposing to open to restricted energy development as part of its Little Snake Resource Management Plan, which is now being revised.

Environmentalists would like to see about 260,000 acres declared wilderness in the Vermillion Basin area, where the BLM in 2001 identified only about 77,000 acres suitable for wilderness designation.

But regardless of its wilderness quality, the wildlife-rich basin could be in the path of the next wave of energy development, and the time for people to speak up about its future is now, Jones said.

The deadline for public comment about the management plan is May 16.

The BLM is proposing to allow 1 percent of the land surface in the Vermillion Basin to be disturbed by energy development at any one time.

For example, an energy company can develop 1 percent of the land in the basin, reclaim it, then develop another 1 percent.

With some differences, the plan is similar to the BLM’s vision for energy development on the Roan Plateau.

Jones said the Little Snake plan would “radically change” the Vermillion Basin.

But T. Wright Dickinson, a BLM Northwest Resource Advisory Council member and former Moffat County commissioner who participated in the creation of the management plan, said the public has already spoken in favor of energy development in the Vermillion Basin and against creating a wilderness area out of it.

Dickinson said the BLM’s “fair and balanced” proposal for the area allows the basin’s scenery to be protected while allowing energy development that will protect the qualities of the land important to the environmental community.

“Recognizing that there is very high potential for natural gas resources in the area, I feel that it is very appropriate for it (the Vermillion Basin) to be developed and in the right way,” Dickinson said.

But, Jones said, northwest Colorado wilderness advocates only want a small portion of the area made off-limits to energy development that promises to spread throughout the county.

Public outcry before the May 16 deadline, she said, could halt potential energy development there before leasing begins.

Even though many people in other parts of Colorado have never visited or heard of the Vermillion Basin, “six years ago, nobody had ever heard of the Roan Plateau, either,” she said.

Log onto www.co.blm.gov/lra/rmp/index.htm for information on the proposed Little Snake Resource Management Plan, or to comment on it.