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More ways than one to tap Roan's gas reserves

Thursday, August 02, 2007

Colorado Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall have not given up in their efforts to protect the top of the Roan Plateau from potential despoilment as the U.S. Bureau of Land Management prepares to open the top of the Roan to significant commercial gas development.

On Monday, the two Colorado Democrats added an amendment to the massive House energy bill that would prohibit any surface occupancy on public lands on top of the Roan. Leasing of those gas resources would still be allowed under the amendment, but energy companies would have to use directional drilling from drill pads on private lands on the top of the plateau to tap into the formation's gas pools.

Environmental groups have long argued that directional drilling could be used to develop the gas beneath the plateau while leaving public lands atop the Roan relatively unblemished by drill rigs, pads and roads.

Not surprisingly, industry representatives decried the Salazar-Udall amendment, saying it would hurt domestic energy production and harm consumers.

Such arguments carried more persuasiveness a decade or so ago, when technology did not exist to recover significant deposits of natural gas through directional drilling. But today, gas companies routinely drill multiple wells from a single drill pad, and some companies have experimented with long-distance directional drilling to recover gas far from the drill pad.

The Udall-Salazar amendment is not a legislative prohibition against recovering the natural gas beneath the Roan Plateau. But, for all practical purposes, it will require energy companies intent upon developing the vast pools of natural gas believed to underlie the Roan to employ the latest in gas-recovery technology.

Udall's and Salazar's efforts to foreclose the possibility of significant surface disturbance on the top of the Roan will not necessarily be finalized into law. Their amendment is part of the 786-page Energy Independence Act of 2007, which contains scores of controversial provisions. As the House prepares to vote on the full bill — perhaps as early as Friday — efforts could still be made to strip the amendment from the bill. That is more likely to happen when the House and Senate attempt to reconcile differences they have on energy legislation.

The near-term future of the Roan Plateau remains a long way from being fully determined.

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