

Only new act of Congress can protect Roan Plateau



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Last Tuesday, both of Denver's big daily newspapers ran contrasting editorials on efforts by Colorado's big-foot Democrats — i.e., Gov. Bill Ritter, Sen. Ken Salazar and Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall — to head off widescale natural gas leasing on the Roan Plateau for at least another year.

The presumptively liberal editorial page of The Denver Post cheered on Ritter, Udall and the brothers Salazar, arguing that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is moving much too quickly to open the top of the plateau to energy development. The presumptively more conservative-leaning editorial page of the Rocky Mountain News, in decided contrast to the Post, gave Ritter *et al.*, a Bronx cheer, arguing that plans to open the Roan have been proceeding over several years at a glacial pace and it is long past time to get on with it.

As a general rule, I agree with the Rocky's editorial opinion substantially more often than I do the Post's. And even when I disagree with the Rocky's opinion, as I do with its support for opening the Roan Plateau to the oil and gas industry, it's always tough to quibble with the arguments the Rocky marshals in support of its opinion.

In point of fact, the Rocky is absolutely correct that the BLM has moved quite cautiously over a period of years in carefully developing — in the argot of federal land-management bureaucratese — its “preferred alternative” for management of the Roan Plateau. As expected, the BLM's preferred alternative includes opening much of the Roan to energy development just as Congress directed more than a decade ago when it transferred jurisdiction over the tens of thousands of acres of the old U.S. Naval Oil Reserve west of Rifle to the BLM.

To suggest as the Post does that the BLM rushed to open the Roan to energy development makes about as much sense as suggesting that Paris Hilton rushed to serve her time in the Hollywood hoosegow.

Moreover, the Rocky's edit cuts right to the heart of the matter in suggesting that what is really at issue is not so much a desire by Ritter and his fellow Democrats to postpone leasing for a few more months until the BLM can somehow develop a more environmentally “acceptable” management plan. Unh-uh. The Rocky suggests that Colorado Democrats are dreaming of Hillary Clinton or some other Democrat in the White House and are stalling for time as the clock runs out on the Bush administration and its pedal-to-the-metal domestic energy development agenda. (Truth is, BLM's plans for the top of the Roan include many of the protections proposed by conservationists. It's

tough to imagine a more environmentally benign management plan for the Roan short of the BLM formally excluding energy development from it.)

Much as I disagree with the Rocky's editorial opinion, it at least has the virtue of clarity. The Rocky has made the clear-cut argument that, at least in its view, the resource value represented in the Roan's vast natural gas reserves substantially outweighs the resource values that would be greatly diminished, and quite possibly destroyed, in extracting the Roan's natural gas reserves.

Unfortunately, what gets lost in all the back-and-forth about adequate mitigation measures and developing the Western Slope's energy resources in an environmentally responsible manner is that, in many cases, energy development and adequate environmental protection are simply mutually exclusive.

Opening the Roan to energy development as the BLM's preferred management alternative proposes would, among other negative consequences, result in "impacts (that) could never be reversed, especially those that eliminate genetically unique resources represented by populations of rare or disjunct species such as genetically pure Colorado River cutthroat trout."

That's not an assessment offered by some wild-eyed Sierra Clubber or, even worse, a fish-obsessed, card-carrying member of Trout Unlimited. The foregoing assessment is part of the BLM's own analysis of only a small fraction of what is at stake at the top of the Roan vis-a-vis the value of the natural gas resources that underlie it.

So, what's more valuable? The resource values that currently exist on the top of the Roan — resource values such as its genetically pure fisheries, its big-game herds, its clear skies, its undisturbed landscapes and "relative" tranquility — or the value represented in the Roan's trillions of cubic feet of natural gas to an energy-dependent nation?

Truth be told, answering that question one way or the other is a close call. Coloradans who believe that it is more important to protect the Roan's existing resource values than it is to tap its vast gas reserves won't be served by calls from Democrats for more study. Only a new act of Congress can afford the Roan the protection it deserves.