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Sign of things to come on the Roan

Drilling rigs edge closer to plateau

[Dennis Webb](#)
[Glenwood Springs, CO Colorado](#)
July 16, 2007

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As the waters of the East Fork of Parachute Creek tumbled over a 200-foot falls Thursday, storm clouds hovered ominously at the far end of the broad canyon that opens up below this scenic landmark of the Roan Plateau.

The clouds' threat was only temporary, but below them could be seen a more serious concern for advocates of keeping the plateau as it is. In the canyon bottom perhaps a mile downstream of the falls, a drilling rig plumbed for the riches of the natural gas formation thousands of feet below.

The rig is on private land, but is one of several edging ever closer to the public lands of the plateau. And now that the Bureau of Land Management has decided to allow drilling on the plateau top, those seeking to protect the plateau worry that the forested landscape of its upper slopes is about to undergo an industrial transformation.

Keith Goddard, who has a hunting outfitting business on the plateau and has fought for years to keep rigs off the top, worries that those in a position to make a difference "have written this area off."

Goddard kicked up dust with his cowboy boots as he led the way down a stock trail to the creek above the falls Thursday. Two staff members with Trout Unlimited (TU) had filled an SUV with journalists to show them what's at stake on the Roan Plateau, and the drive along its ridges had led to the opposite creek.

It's one of a couple of creeks on the plateau known to hold almost genetically pure populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout. A sizable population is on Trapper Creek, where the anglers will fish next day.

On this afternoon brook trout were far more in evidence, but they were hard to catch and required patient stalking. Before long, Corey Fisher, a TU field coordinator for TU, had taken off his striped shirt and was spooking a 12-inch brookie. He slowly pursued the fish

Outfitter Keith Goddard points out the views from the rim of the Roan Plateau to Texas freelance writer Diana Kunde Thursday. Goddard accompanied Trout Unlimited representatives in leading a media tour on top of the Roan Thursday.

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Water spills down the falls of the East Fork of Parachute Creek. The falls are one of the largest in Colorado.

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But the vegetation begins to change after several switchbacks, until pines and aspen are encountered even before reaching the plateau top.

Beyond the Roan's rim, the desert gives over entirely to rolling, lush country full of wildflowers and aspen trees, and valleys running with spring-fed streams. Grouse, red-tailed hawk, elk and other animals make appearances in a place where deer, bear and mountain lion also abound.

"You get up here and it's a totally different world," Hunt said, before admiring the size of the aspen trees. "This is signature Colorado stuff, you know?"

The question is whether gas development could make the plateau look more like the heavily drilled landscape in the Colorado River Valley below. Some of the ridge-top jeep roads would be widened to accommodate drilling traffic, and already drill rigs can be seen along ridgelines of private lands just outside the BLM part of the plateau. A puff of black smoke issued from one of them Thursday.

Although no rigs have reached BLM lands, the traffic impacts have. Williams Production was using the road following the plateau rim to reach drilling sites on private lands on the plateau - something it no longer needs to do now that it has opened a new road of its own on those lands. Goddard is glad Williams took that step. He is concerned about the impacts of future drilling traffic on big game.

Watershed worries

The drilling plan for the plateau calls for rigs to operate from ridge tops, to protect watersheds. But Goddard thinks the quarter-mile buffer zones around creeks are insufficient because many of the creeks are fed by springs that are farther away.

"All you've got to do is screw up one spring and you've lost the whole creek," he said.

Fisher, of TU, shares such concerns. He said a drilling-related spill in Wyoming wiped out one cutthroat trout population.

"Poor land management flows downhill," he said.

Susan Alvillar, of Williams Production, said the company already has numerous environmental protection programs in place for its drilling, including for protecting against spills.

knees almost at creek level before catching and then releasing his prey.

It was a relaxing break for Fisher and Chris Hunt, an Idaho resident and TU's communications director on public lands issues. But Thursday's media tour was being conducted for more serious reasons, the same ones that had U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., grilling James Caswell in Washington that day over his nomination to be director of the BLM.

Like Goddard, Salazar and TU object to the BLM letting drill rigs on top of the Roan. Salazar has said he would place a Senate "hold" on Caswell's nomination until the Department of Interior gives Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter, a fellow Democrat, the 120 days he has requested to review the Roan plan.

Far from a wasteland

Hunt's hope for Thursday's tour was to show that the Roan isn't the "desert wasteland" that he says some energy industry representatives have described it as being.

Certainly, the view from below, down in Rifle, can be deceptive. From there, the plateau presents itself as a steep, stark cliff running to the north and west and climbing thousands of feet. And the drive on the JQS Road up those cliffs starts out in a landscape of piñon and juniper trees and sagebrush.



Chris Hunt of Trout Unlimited releases a brook trout that he caught in the calm waters of East Fork of Parachute Creek, not far above where the creek plunges over a 200-foot waterfall.

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"We've got a myriad of regulations that we follow every day," she said.

She said Williams has 14 wells on top of the Roan now, and three rigs that are currently drilling.

"We've operated up there since the '80s, and certainly it's on our radar screen that everything that we do needs to be in accordance with all those regulations and make sure that we don't impact any of our precious resources up there," she said.

Alvillar said many who work for Williams are avid hunters and anglers who understand the importance of protecting the environment. She also noted that the Roan plan is "very prescriptive" in aiming to reduce the impacts of drilling.

But that's not assurance enough for Goddard. He said he gets probably 50 calls a year from hunters hoping to find a place to go where they can enjoy their experience without seeing lots of people, traffic and drilling rigs. For years, he has been able to offer the Roan as one such place.

But with rigs looming on nearby horizons like storm clouds, and the BLM ready to invite them in if its plan withstands political challenges, he knows that may be about to change.

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