

Campaign disappointed in BLM decision to immediately lease Roan Plateau's public lands Record of Decision ignores public opinion, jeopardizes wildlife, recreation, and backcountry lands

The Campaign to Save Roan Plateau today expressed extreme disappointment at the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) decision to immediately lease Roan Plateau's public lands for oil and gas development, noting that this move by the federal government flies in the face of seven years of public comment, which has overwhelmingly opposed drilling the public lands on top of the Plateau.

"For more than five years BLM has diligently gathered public comments—and for that entire period that comment has solidly supported a single position—Roan Plateau's public lands are too valuable to our communities to turn into a gas field," said Duke Cox with the Grand Valley Citizens Alliance, a Garfield County community group. "BLM's decision contradicts years of public involvement and should not stand."

On May 14, Colorado's governor, Bill Ritter, formally requested additional time to review the proposed final plan before the agency issued its decision. At 4:30 PM yesterday, June 7, that request was denied. The administration claimed that since the BLM held meetings with various cooperating agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources under a previous administration, no further review was warranted, even though the public has never had the chance to review, consider, or comment on the final plan, which differs substantially from anything the BLM included in its draft plan and environmental impact statement.

"We are disappointed that the BLM refused to allow Governor Ritter and his staff the chance to review this final plan before it issued its decision. There is no rush to lease the Roan Plateau given the large number of leases already controlled by the oil and gas companies and the many additional BLM acres in Colorado available for leasing," said Steve Smith, Associate Regional Director with The Wilderness Society. "The need for deliberation is all the more important because the BLM also refused to allow public consideration and comment on the substantial changes it made to its earlier proposed plan. It is unfortunate that the BLM has taken the path of confrontation rather than working with the state and public to provide the best management for Roan Plateau."

On May 15, Congressmen John Salazar and Mark Udall announced their intentions to seek a funding limitation blocking leasing of the Roan Plateau for one year. The BLM's rush to lease these lands not only ignores the majority of public comment it received leading up to and on the draft plan, but to many it appears a desperate act to open these popular lands to development before elected officials can act to protect the Plateau.

"Congressmen Salazar and Udall are on the right track in seeking to protect Roan Plateau from leasing and drilling under the BLM's controversial plan. There is no need or requirement to rush to open these lands for drilling. Our elected representatives—led by John Salazar—deserve many thanks for their leadership," said Elise Jones, Executive Director of the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

In its media materials released with the decision, the BLM claims that it is mandated by Congress to immediately lease all of the Roan Plateau's public lands to the oil and gas industry. This is a false claim, and as recently as 2002 the BLM itself acknowledged that there was no such requirement included in the Transfer Act, legislation that turned these lands over to the BLM from the U.S. Department of Energy in 1997.

"When Congress passed the Transfer Act, former Congressmen Joel Hefley and David Skaggs made it clear that they expected BLM to protect Roan Plateau's aspen forests, mountain streams, wildlife habitat and backcountry recreation uses," according to Mike Chiropolos, Lands Program Director at Western Resource Advocates. "Drilling the entire Plateau at 10-acre spacing was never anticipated. BLM's claim that Congress intended the entire Plateau to be leased doesn't hold water. Roan Plateau was supposed to be managed on Colorado's terms, not by executive fiat from Washington, D.C."

Local governments, area residents, and citizens from across the nation have consistently supported protection for these public lands, and more than 98% of the 75,000 comments received on the draft plan called for no drilling on the top of the Plateau. A recent poll of 400 likely voters in Colorado’s 3rd Congressional District (represented by John Salazar) showed 72% support for prohibiting drilling on the public lands atop the Plateau. This support was strong across party affiliations.

Now that it has issued its decision, the next step for those opposed to the plan would be to file a lawsuit to block implementation of the decision. The Campaign to Save Roan Plateau is currently reviewing the decision and has not yet decided on its next steps, although it vows to continue its efforts to protect Roan Plateau.

“This has been a multi-year campaign and all options remain on the table. What this move by the BLM shows, more than anything, is the need for Colorado’s congressional delegation to act quickly. Our elected leaders can act to support the people of Colorado who have clearly, and overwhelmingly, stated that protection for Roan Plateau should be the top priority,” said Pete Kolbenschlager with the Campaign to Save Roan Plateau.

Already in 2007, Garfield County has seen nearly 800 new wells approved for drilling, with Roan Plateau representing one of the last large unleased blocks of BLM lands left in the Piceance Basin, the epicenter of Colorado’s drilling activity.

The Campaign to Save Roan Plateau is made up of Colorado and national conservation groups, and thousands of citizen supporters, working to ensure that Roan Plateau’s important habitat, backcountry, recreation, and wilderness-quality lands are properly managed and protected. Background information on the Campaign and an extensive archive of materials can be found at www.SaveRoanPlateau.org. Members of the media and photographers interested in an over flight of Roan Plateau can call Pete Kolbenschlager at 970-261-0678.

#

CONTACTS

Duke Cox, Grand Valley Citizens Alliance	970-379-3649 (cell)
Steve Smith, The Wilderness Society	303-650-5818 x 106
Elise Jones, Colorado Environmental Coalition	303-534-7066 x 1504 303-885-4273 (cell)
Mike Chiropolos, Western Resource Advocates	303-444-1188 x 217 303-956-0595 (cell)
Pete Kolbenschlager, Campaign to Save Roan Plateau	970-261-0678 (cell)