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BLM ignores Colorado officials, will offer Roan leases

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colo. – West Slope elected officials sharply criticized the Bureau of Land Management’s decision to lease most of the last, undrilled public lands on the Roan Plateau this summer, saying that it ignores the will of western Coloradans.

The federal agency said Monday that its quarterly lease sale in August would include all 55,000 acres of the public lands atop the Roan Plateau. The proposed auction would commit the government to let industry drill many of the most sensitive lands on the Roan, which is already surrounded by thousands of wells. BLM plans call for industry to drill hundreds of wells on the top of the Roan during the course of 20 years.

The decision ignores efforts by Gov. Ritter, members of Colorado’s Congressional delegation and a host of local elected West Slope officials to secure alternatives that protect more of the Roan’s important wildlife habitat and watersheds from industrial drilling. U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar who is working on legislation to secure a compromise developed by Ritter into law, immediately blasted the decision as “unacceptable.”

“This is a mandate from Washington, not a Colorado solution,” said Mayor Michael Hassig of Carbondale. “Once again, the BLM has demonstrated that the needs of local communities simply don’t matter when drilling is involved. It’s clear that the Bush administration has only one agenda - to get these lands leased before they leave office.”

Despite its relatively small size, the Roan Plateau’s forested ridges and streams are rich in wildlife and recreational opportunities. In hearing after hearing and through multiple public comment processes, local government officials, sportsmen, outfitters and tens of thousands of citizens urged that the Roan Plateau be protected, and have overwhelmingly supported its management for other public and traditional uses besides energy development.

According to the BLM, about 95 percent of its lands in the Piceance Basin—of which the Roan is only about 1%—have already been leased by the oil and gas industry. Many of the private lands in the area are likewise owned or under the control of these companies. Drillers have already installed more than 1,300 producing natural gas wells in the Roan Plateau Planning area, and have permits to drill almost 900 more.

“We are developing energy in the Rocky Mountain region at a record-setting pace,” said Garfield County Commissioner Tresi Houpt. “We need to be careful about how we are doing this, and recognize when a remarkable area like the Roan Plateau, needs to be given special consideration. Unfortunately, the many, many Coloradans who have tried to communicate this to the BLM have been met with a stone wall.”

West Slope communities like those represented by Mayor Bruce Christensen are struggling to keep up with costs imposed by the boom on their roads, municipal programs, housing, and drinking water sources.

“Those of us who live in West Slope communities continue worry about the rapid rate at which the government is opening up public lands to exploration,” said Christensen. “The social and environmental impacts are potentially extreme, and we’re just not seeing any evidence that the BLM cares about us.”

The BLM’s decision ignores not only the will of many Colorado elected officials—from the Governor and congressional delegation to the local communities most affected by the drilling boom—but a coalition of conservation, citizen, and recreation groups that have long advocated for the Roan’s protection.

“The BLM received tens of thousands of comments from citizens about appropriate management of the Roan Plateau,” said Clare Bastable with the Colorado Mountain Club. “While there may be variations in what different organizations and officials have asked for, we all agree the BLM plan is not the answer.”

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For more information, a media archive, photos, and video b-roll, please contact brian@saveroleanplateau.org or visit the Campaign to Save Roan Plateau online at www.SaveRoanPlateau.org.

Media interested in an aerial tour of the Roan Plateau area, please contact Pete Kolbensschlag at 970-261-0678 or via email at Pete@MountainWestStrategies.com