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PROTECTING OUR NATURAL CAPITAL

Drilling Roan Plateau and Vermillion Basin would be a bitter and unnecessary sacrifice:
Clean energy is the better route for Coloradans

Contact:	Joe Neuhof, Colorado Environmental Coalition	720-933-6814
	Duke Cox, Western Colorado Congress	970-379-3649
	John Rosapepe, Colorado Trout Unlimited	970-485-3011
	Pete Kolbenschlager, Mountain West Strategies	970-261-0678

RIFLE – Conservationists and sportsmen rallied in support of protecting the top of the Roan Plateau and the Vermillion Basin Saturday in response to a push by industry and supporters to expedite development in these special areas.

“The Roan Plateau is more than just a potential source of natural gas,” said Keith Goddard, chairman of the Colorado Mule Deer Association. “It’s a source of clean water. It’s habitat for wildlife. It’s an oasis of relatively unspoiled land in a sea of drilling.

“Congressmen John Salazar and Mark Udall understand this,” Goddard added. That’s why they’ve proposed that the Bureau of Land Management implement a development plan that protects these values while it provides access to the gas deposits beneath.”

The Salazar/Udall proposal, which is part of the House energy bill, would ban surface disturbance of the public lands atop the 9,000-foot plateau but allow companies to develop the minerals by drilling from the base and from other, private lands on top. This will let industry tap the Roan’s gas without needlessly sacrificing the hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities that contribute so much to the local economy and way of life.

“We commend Congressmen Salazar and Udall for their leadership and commitment to protect the irreplaceable natural resources of this unique Colorado landscape,” said Joe Neuhof, West Slope Field Director of the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “We wish other politicians could see the wisdom of waiting so that we can find ways that does not needlessly damage the Roan Plateau, and protects our quality-of-life and long-term economy.”

In the past few weeks, industry has mounted an aggressive campaign to support the drilling of Roan Plateau and the Vermillion Basin. However, there are serious questions about the BLM’s calculations about the potential financial benefits of leasing and developing these special places. And some of the projected revenue windfalls touted by industry supporters are contradicted by analysis of government data.

In addition, industry is currently sitting on a huge backlog of leases. More than 4.5 million acres have been leased in Colorado already. Less than 30 percent of those leases are now producing.

“We can afford to wait for directional drilling technology to improve so that industry can reach most of the Roan’s gas from private lands on top and from limited numbers of well pads at the base.” said Pete Kolbenschlag, who works with the Campaign to Save Roan Plateau.

The energy industry plays a relatively small part in Colorado’s economy. Oil and gas development accounts for 2 percent of the jobs in Colorado and for less than 2 percent of the total personal income in Colorado. Income from retirees, investors and others who come here for our healthy landscape far outweighs the contributions of oil and gas. Non-labor income, including retirement income and investment income, accounted for 26 percent of total personal income in Colorado in 2005.

“Most don’t move to the West Slope to live near gas wells,” said Duke Cox of Western Colorado Congress. “They move here because of our clean air, clean water and our way of life. All of that is threatened by this energy boom if it is not balanced with also protecting our special places and clean environment.”

Nor will all this drilling result in lower energy costs for Coloradans. The price of gas in Colorado has been kept low by a lack of pipeline capacity. New and expanded pipelines, like the Rockies Express and the TransColorado, are almost completed. An energy analyst who spoke at this week’s Colorado Oil and Gas Association conference said he expected the cost of natural gas to rise for regional customers.

“We’re going to have to pay more to heat our homes whether we drill the Roan next year or wait for industry to develop better directional drilling technologies,” Kolbenschlag said. “It’s not Colorado’s job to sacrifice places like the Roan Plateau so industry can increase its short-term profits. Industry can wait until they can develop the Roan responsibly.”

Unlike the Roan Plateau, the Vermillion Basin is underlain by a marginal supply of natural gas. A Wilderness Society analysis, based on USGS data and using accepted scientific protocols, found that Vermillion Basin represents less than 5% of the technically recoverable gas resources within the Little Snake Planning Area, enough to meet national consumption for a mere 10 days. Compared with the potential loss of wildlife habitat, prehistoric rock art, backcountry recreation opportunities and our children’s wild heritage, the value of the gas in Vermillion is small.

“Renewable energy and energy efficiency are by far the better path for Colorado to take,” said Neuhof. “Coloradans would be much better off if government convinced industry to develop responsibly while investing now in a future based on clean energy and energy efficiency. The energy bill that Salazar and Udall helped pass does both.”

“Under the Congressmen’s proposal, most of the Roan Plateau area will remain open to surface development,” said John Rosapepe with Colorado Trout Unlimited. “But its most sensitive places—its undeveloped backcountry, native trout streams, and critical habitat would remain about as they are now, and open for traditional uses, like fishing, hunting, ranching, and solitude.”

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Additional contacts: Michelle Haefele, Resource Economist, The Wilderness Society 303-774-1632

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 Roan Plateau Campaign and an extensive archive of materials can be found at www.SaveRoanPlateau.org; information on the Vermillion Basin Campaign can be found at www.savevermillion.org.