

Roan leasing delay is entirely appropriate

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The trouble with repeating urban legends often enough — and, in this case, a “rural legend” is perhaps a better description — is that sooner or later much of the public is likely to consider the legendary characterization to be gospel truth. And that’s not generally a good thing.

One of the most oft-repeated regional phantasms has it that Congress, in legislation sponsored by former Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell roughly a decade or so ago, specifically obligated federal land managers to open the top of the Roan Plateau to widespread oil and gas development. Well, not exactly.

In opposing an effort by U.S. Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall to deny funding to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to lease the top of the Roan for at least a year, Mesa County state Sen. Josh Penry repeated a rural legend spun by former Mesa County Commissioner Kathy Hall and other highly effective advocates of the oil and gas industry.

“I hate to be the one to jog the failing memory of the congressmen, but it was Bill Clinton who signed the law mandating leasing on the Roan,” Penry said while chiding Salazar and Udall for standing in the way of progress.

Penry’s foregoing observation isn’t exactly pure, unadulterated moon drift. It’s more on the order of the 99 percent pure variety. However, we’re willing to give Penry the benefit of the doubt that he is peddling moon drift unwittingly, such is the tendency for rural legends — if they are repeated often enough — to be transmuted into gospel truths.

The legislation sponsored by Campbell and signed into law by Clinton that transferred managerial responsibilities over the Roan Plateau from the Department of Energy to the BLM indeed included a statutory directive to the BLM that the lands be managed for domestic energy development.

However, Campbell’s legislation transferred tens of thousands of acres of the old U.S. Naval Oil Shale Reserve, an area covering a vast swath of land lying north of I-70 roughly between west Rifle and Parachute and including the top of the Roan Plateau. It wasn’t specifically the top of the Roan Plateau that Congress directed the BLM to manage for energy development. It was the entirety of the old U.S. Naval Oil Shale Reserve.

In point of fact, the BLM is managing the old Naval Oil Shale Reserve precisely in the manner Congress directed. So intent has the BLM been to carry out the statutory directive in support of energy development that it’s only a slight exaggeration to characterize the number of well pads and drill rigs already festooning the lower elevations of the old oil shale reserve as not greatly dissimilar to the multitude of pin pricks on a Chinese

acupuncture patient. The top of the Roan is the only part of the old oil shale reserve that the BLM has yet to open to leasing.

The top of the Roan Plateau today is an island of relative tranquility — we use the words *relative tranquility* advisedly inasmuch as significant drilling already is occurring on private lands on the Roan — in a vast sea of frenetic drilling activity. Maintaining what remains of the relative tranquility that currently exists on the top of the Roan while opening it to energy development is simply impossible.

We understand that reasonable arguments can be made on both sides of the highly contentious Roan Plateau debate.

However, given the generally open-ended degree of development already occurring on the old Naval Oil Shale Reserve and the tens of thousands of acres of public lands surrounding it, the effort by Salazar and Udall to forestall leasing on the top of the Roan for a few months in order to ensure adequate protection for the Roan's other historic uses such as grazing, hunting and recreation is by no means unreasonable.