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Campaign to Save Roan Plateau, local leaders object to Roan Plateau management direction
Proposed final plan dramatically underestimates pace and impacts of gas drilling

The proposed management plan for Roan Plateau dramatically understates the number of gas wells and associated impacts on recreation and natural features of the western slope icon, according to the network seeking protection for the area. Colorado conservationists, recreation groups, and community leaders, today announced their initial response to the proposed final management plan for the Roan Plateau, noting that the plan did not offer the level of protection long sought by area communities and over 73,000 American Citizens—that there be no gas drilling on top of the plateau. In fact, over 98% of comments submitted on the draft plan supported this position.

The final Environmental Impact Statement and proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) for Roan Plateau was announced by the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on September 7. The plan would immediately lease all of the public lands in the area—including the plateau's top—for oil and gas development.

Primary among concerns is the plan's estimate that only thirteen well pads and 210 wells would be installed on top of the plateau (1,570 total wells in the planning area). Members of the Campaign, studying the plan, cite the current pace of gas development and industry trends to note that the impact will likely be much greater.

The proposed plan and its environmental impact statement assume that gas drilling would occur atop the plateau only a few months each year using a small number of drilling rigs. The plan also analyzes only the first 20 years of gas development. Meanwhile, gas industry sources commenting on the draft plan predicted that drilling is likely to continue year-round, and that 3,000 wells will ultimately be drilled to fully recover the area's natural gas.

“To pretend that only a couple hundred wells would be drilled on top of the plateau is misleading and fails to recognize the truly severe impact that will occur on the plateau if it is leased,” said Steve Smith, Associate Regional Director with The Wilderness Society's Four Corners Office.

Opening the public lands on top of Roan Plateau is counter to the vast majority of comments received the BLM during its planning process.

“This is simply not what most nearby governments and local citizens have urged as management for these popular public lands,” said Bruce Christensen, mayor of the City of Glenwood Springs. “Throughout the planning process, local governments have strongly and repeatedly asked that the BLM adopt a plan that protects the natural features of these lands for their other values and for their traditional and public uses. The proposed plan does not offer that protection.” Glenwood Springs worked as a Cooperating Agency with BLM during the planning process and has, like other municipalities in Garfield County, steadfastly opposed drilling on the Roan Plateau's top and cliffs.

Since late August, a majority of municipalities in the county—Glenwood Springs, New Castle, Silt, and Carbondale—have passed resolutions reaffirming their positions that these lands are best managed for other public uses, and specifically supporting comments by the City of Rifle, also a Cooperating Agency, which stress the importance of these undeveloped lands to the local economy, recreation, and regional quality of life.

Campaign partners acknowledged that the proposed plan includes some unique innovations, but noted that the vast majority of public land in the area is already leased or being developed for energy production, and that Roan Plateau is best managed for other uses:

“We appreciate that the BLM sought to limit surface disturbance and to try other unique ideas in managing oil and gas development,” said Joe Neuhof of the Colorado Environmental Coalition, “While Colorado continues to provide gas to meet the nations energy needs, we also recognize that certain lands are just too important to turn them into a gas field, under any drilling regime. Some lands—including the Roan Plateau—are best managed and protected for traditional uses.”

Colorado currently has approximately 30,000 active oil and gas wells. In 2006 Garfield County, where the Roan Plateau is located, has led all of the counties in the state in the number of drilling permits issued – this year, Garfield County is on pace to approve about 1,600 permits, an increase of 30% since 2005. A new well is drilled approximately every 15-20 days in Garfield County, with projections for over 15,000 wells to be drilled in the county over the next decade.

In addition to underestimating drilling impacts, conservation groups studying the plan have noted several particular concerns in the proposed plan, including:

- the plan’s allowance for waiving and modifying stipulations designed to protect resources like native trout, steep slopes, and other resources;
- severe impacts to the area’s popular backcountry recreational opportunities;
- little mention—and no protection—of wilderness characteristics found by the BLM on over 19,000 acres of public land; and
- doubt about the BLM’s funding and ability to actually implement and enforce the plan.

No Surface Occupancy stipulations (which prohibit oil and gas operations from disturbing sensitive areas) and other protective restrictions outlined in the proposed plan can be waived or modified, with few exceptions.

“With drilling atop the plateau, we remain troubled that BLM will not be able to provide the protections this unique area deserves,” said Ken Neubecker of Colorado Trout Unlimited. “The BLM doesn’t have a very good track record for providing the oversight, monitoring and enforcement that the Plan states are needed to protect the extremely sensitive fish, wildlife and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern on the Roan Plateau.”

Although the final EIS acknowledges the wide-spread support for protecting the Roan’s undeveloped settings, wildlife, and continued recreation opportunities, it concludes that the proposed plan’s emphasis on natural gas development would conflict with such protection. The final EIS bluntly states “Although public comments on the Draft RMPA/EIS indicated a demand for undeveloped recreation settings, BLM has concluded that management to accommodate substantial oil and gas development precludes maintaining characteristics specific to undeveloped recreation settings.”

Such sacrifice of public and natural values for the sake of a single use is not in keeping with the BLM’s mandate to protect and manage for multiple uses.

“Roan Plateau is important for its backcountry recreation opportunities,” said Clare Bastable with the 10,000-member Colorado Mountain Club. “We are disappointed that BLM would choose to sacrifice this important function of the Plateau.”

A 30-day protest period, ending October 16, allows any organization, government, agency, or citizen who previously commented on the draft plan to file a protest.

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A fact sheet with supporting information and references to the FEIS is available at www.SaveRoanPlateau.org. Additional materials, including maps and photographs, are also available.

Members of the media interested in an over flight of Roan Plateau should call Pete Kolbenschlag at 970-261-0678