

What BLM's Proposed Plan Means for Recreation and Wildlife

Proposed Roan Plateau plan jeopardizes fish, wildlife, and recreation

On September 7, the Bureau of Land Management released its proposed management plan for the Roan Plateau, along with its final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for that action. A 30-day protest period on the proposed plan ends October 16, 2006. This fact sheet looks at specific details and citations from the final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which describe some of the impacts to the Roan Plateau's world-class recreational opportunities and quality wildlife habitats.

The BLM claims that its proposed final plan for the Roan Plateau protects wildlife and related recreation. While the plan does offer some innovative ideas to protect wildlife habitat, ultimately both of these important values of the Plateau would be greatly compromised under the proposed plan in order to manage for 'substantial' oil and gas development.

BLM's proposed plan does exactly what communities have urged against - it opens the top and cliffs of the Roan Plateau for oil and gas drilling. Since the planning process started in 2001, citizens and local communities have been asking the BLM to leave Roan Plateau "as it is" and to protect these public lands for traditional uses, such as hunting, fishing, backcountry recreation, scenic drives, and camping.



Photo by Branson Reynolds

Local communities understand the importance of Roan Plateau's undeveloped public lands to their quality-of-life and for the outstanding recreational opportunities these provide to residents and visitors alike. Each year hunting alone on the Roan Plateau brings in about \$4 million, according to the Division of Wildlife. In September 2005 comments submitted on the draft plan, the City of Rifle noted that:

"The City of Rifle is in opposition to any oil/gas or other mineral development on top of the Roan Plateau. It is the City's position that the area above the rim of the Plateau should be reserved and managed for significant historical uses, which include recreation, hunting, livestock grazing, ranching, etc. We feel no plan can make such uses compatible with natural gas exploration."

The top of Roan Plateau includes important elk calving grounds and summer security zones for both elk and deer. Streams on the top provide habitat to pure strains of native Colorado River cutthroat trout. Over 21,000 acres of the Planning Area were found by BLM to be eligible for wilderness designation.

Impacts to Recreation

"Opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation, naturalness, and solitude would not be preserved under the Proposed Plan. The resultant decrease in lands having wilderness values would be cumulative to other such losses in Garfield County and the region." Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) 4-127

"Although public comments on the Draft EIS indicated a demand for undeveloped recreation settings, the BLM has concluded that management to accommodate substantial oil and gas development precludes maintaining characteristics specific to undeveloped recreation settings." FEIS 2-14, 2-62



"Since recreation is not a focus of management but an allowable multiple use within the ERMA, maintaining a specifically identified recreation opportunity is not a management priority, so no mitigation is proposed. If crowding during the hunting season becomes an issue, CDOW has the ability to limit the numbers of hunters." FEIS 4-113

"The physical recreation settings as defined by the ROS classes would be changed and permanently altered due to construction of roads and oil and gas wells, and other ground-disturbing activities. Special stipulations for visual resources would indirectly reduce these losses. However, the losses would be essentially permanent, even with the best currently available habitat restoration technology and funding levels." FEIS 4-129

Impacts to Wildlife Habitat

“While pockets of naturalness and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation may be protected with [No Ground Disturbance/No Surface Occupancy] stipulations for other resources, they would be fragmented and smaller than 5,000 acres... This would effectively eliminate wilderness character in the three [wilderness] inventory units [on the top of the Plateau] as a whole. An increase in development such as road and pipeline construction, development of drill pads, and increased human activities would substantially degrade all wilderness characteristics.” FEIS 4-126

“While closure and reclamation of temporarily disturbed areas can eventually restore lost habitat values, the disturbance may have a long duration (20 or more years for a well) or require years or decades for recovery of pre-disturbance structure and function (pipeline corridors, reclaimed roads).” FEIS 4-44

“Changes in big game habitats and habits would alter the experience or even displace people who visit an area because they enjoy the wildlife, scenery, views, and aesthetics of the area. Onsite outfitter/guide operations would also be affected, although the extent of change cannot be estimated.” FEIS 4-129

“Some areas of high-quality wildlife habitat would be lost or permanently altered...Some of these impacts could never be reversed, especially those that eliminate genetically unique resources...such as genetically pure Colorado River cutthroat trout.” FEIS 4-44, 4-130



Under the proposed plan, Roan Plateau's public lands will become an industrial zone like it's private lands shown here, that are currently being developed for their natural gas reserves. PHOTO: Dana Barker/EcoFlight

In its Final EIS, the BLM proposes Off-Site Mitigation as one method for dealing with the loss of wildlife habitat in the Planning area:

“Habitat restoration and enhancement measures could also be implemented on lands outside the Planning Area.... A variant on the concept of offsite mitigation is that of “habitat banking.” ... The bank would then be used to offset unavoidable impacts in the project area.” FEIS 4-62

However, off-site Mitigation is not the solution for destroying wildlife habitat in important areas such as the Roan Plateau.

Wildlife is not adapted to changing their traditional migration routes and caving areas, in order to seek out an off-site, distant habitat replacement area, which is why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and even BLM in other oil and gas plans, have called off-site mitigation a “last choice.”¹ Off-site mitigation should never be used to compensate for avoiding and minimizing impacts in the first place, and for ensuring that adequate mitigations are provided in place to reduce the significance of impacts.

For Roan Plateau the better solution is to manage these public lands for the many other traditional uses they already provide, in keeping what the local communities, sportsmen, and other recreationists have been urging all along.

¹ U.S. DOI—Bureau of Land Management, Rawlins Field Office Resource Management Plan Draft EIS online at www.blm.gov/rmp/wy/rawlins/documents/DEIS/Appendix/Appendix_18_Rawlins_DEIS.pdf. Red Lodge Clearinghouse: Off-site Mitigation, online at www.redlodgclearinghouse.org/waysandmeans/offsite.html

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