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Groups plan suit to prevent BLM from shortchanging Colorado BLM ignoring solutions that better protect the Roan Plateau and American taxpayers

DENVER, CO—A coalition of groups today announced its intention to file a lawsuit to prevent the federal government from leasing the Roan Plateau under a plan that will needlessly damage important wildlife habitat, traditional uses, and cherished public lands for the benefit of the richest industry in the world.

“For eight years, tens of thousands of citizens, local governments, sportsmen, recreationalists and conservation groups have tried to make sure that the Roan’s critical wildlife areas, clean water, and backcountry are properly managed and protected,” said Elise Jones with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “With the Bush administration’s recent decision to lease all the remaining public lands in and around the Roan, they’ve left Colorado citizens no other option but to ask for our day in court.”

The Bush administration recently announced it would proceed with its plan to lease all the Roan’s public lands to the highest industry bidders on Aug. 14. In doing so, the administration has ignored the objections of Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter, US Sen. Ken Salazar, Congressmen John Salazar and Mark Udall as well as a of a broad and diverse coalition of Western Slope officials, sportsmen and conservationists.

Litigation will seek to compel the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to address the environmental and fiscal impact of its plan to industrialize the Roan Plateau’s public lands.

Under the Bush administration, BLM has already leased the vast majority of public lands in western Colorado’s Piceance Basin (where the Roan is located), although only a fraction have been put into production. Over 90% of the BLM lands in the Piceance Basin are leased and under control of the oil and gas industry. The public lands of Roan Plateau represent only about 1% of the Piceance Basin, and sit as an island of undeveloped habitat and quality recreation lands amid a flood of drilling and industrial development. Drilling around the Roan is occurring at a frantic pace, and energy companies are sitting on more than a decade’s worth of unused leases and drilling permits.

“The Bush Administration has skirted the law to push drilling, ignoring the wishes of local governments, the State of Colorado, and citizens from all walks of life in favor of its industry friends,” said Matt Garrington of Environment Colorado. “Before it leaves office, it is working to hand over tens of thousands of additional acres of Colorado’s public lands to the oil and gas companies. There is no need to rush to lease more land, especially not in sensitive places like Roan Plateau.”

Groups plan on filing the lawsuit in the next few weeks and are inviting other interested parties to join with them. The lawsuit will assert that the BLM failed to properly consider alternatives that would protect the Roan’s most sensitive resources, and failed to account for all of the project’s impacts to the region’s air and wildlife.

“At every stage of the planning process, in every public comment period, Coloradans and Americans across the country have strongly favored protection for these lands,” said Marc Ross with Colorado-based Rock the Earth. “Colorado acted in good faith, trusting in the Bush administration’s promises that it would listen to local governments and those most affected by its decisions, but it has been like talking to a brick wall. Let’s be clear. This is a last resort.”

Pending legislation in Congress would better ensure that these public lands are protected for their other values, and allow energy development to happen at a measured pace, bring more revenue into the state's coffers, and safeguard the Roan's most sensitive lands. In contrast, under the Bush administration's plans, even the Roan's most critical environmental areas could be drilled—with a simple waiver from the BLM. Also, most of the natural gas from the region is destined for export, which will drive up, rather than reduce, local prices according to industry analysts.

"Instead of investing in a new energy economy, the administration has shown time and time again that it is only interested in industry profits, not consumers and certainly not the environment," said Bob Millette of the Roaring Fork Group of the Sierra Club. "What's the rush to lease and drill these lands, even as Congress is considering legislation and companies have more than enough work to keep them busy drilling for many years? We have to live here after this boom goes bust. We will not sit idly by as our children's future is needlessly sacrificed."

In addition to the litigation, sportsmen and conservation groups plan to file a formal protest of the lease sale by July 30, the deadline for such filing. In a news release issued June 10, Colorado's Governor Bill Ritter also indicated that the State of Colorado will be examining its options "including a formal protest" to oppose the August lease sale.

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For more information, a media archive, photos, and video b-roll, please contact brian@saveropianplateau.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