

Roan leasing delay lauded by officials, planned by industry



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RIFLE — Area officials and others Tuesday welcomed a possible one-year delay of mineral leasing on top of the Roan Plateau. Representatives with two Garfield County natural-gas operators, however, said the delay is unnecessary.

U.S. Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall have asked a House appropriations subcommittee to withhold funding for leasing 34,758 acres of public lands on top of the plateau for a year. The subcommittee is expected to review the request early next week.

The two Democrats said Tuesday they acted after letters from the Garfield County municipalities of Rifle, Glenwood Springs, New Castle and Carbondale, outdoor recreation and sportsmen's groups sought a delay to allow more input into the Bureau of Land Management process.

The BLM's final resource management plan calls for gas development over much of the top of the plateau, with various restrictions. The plan was adopted after meetings with area and state government agencies. A record of decision on the plan is expected sometime this summer or sooner, BLM spokesman David Boyd said.

"We're following current Congressional direction that called for leasing and a management plan," he said. Boyd said the soonest leasing could occur would be after October, the start of the next federal fiscal year.

Udall said the "seminal" moment that helped convince him more time is needed came at a February meeting in Glenwood Springs with Salazar, area elected officials and conservation groups.

"Rifle's mayor talked about the importance of the oil and gas industry to the area and what happened during the last boom and bust cycle," Udall said in a conference call with reporters. "But he also stressed the importance of the historical uses of the top of the plateau for hunting and other activities. So we want to make sure guides and outfitters and sportsmen's groups have a chance to review and comment on the plan."

"We're not saying (leasing on top) is something that should never be done," Salazar said. "We just want more time so the thousands and thousands of calls we've received from constituents concerned about the Roan are heard, and to make sure hunting and fishing and other uses can continue."

Rifle Mayor Keith Lambert said it was nice to know Salazar and Udall listened to local concerns.

“At that meeting, they did seem to consider the historic uses of the plateau and how important that was as an economic engine, both before and after the bust,” Lambert said.

Bob Elderkin of Silt, a retired BLM employee, has represented the Colorado Mule Deer Association on big-game issues associated with leasing and drilling on top of the Roan.

“We’ve never been out to stop the industry; we just want them to do their drilling with as little surface disturbance as possible,” Elderkin said. “We won’t lose any tax money like the industry said. It’s still going to be there, it will just be delayed.”

The two biggest area gas operators, Williams Production and EnCana Oil and Gas, said they didn’t feel a delay was warranted.

“There has been a carefully planned process since November 2000, when they started the public scoping,” Williams spokeswoman Susan Alvillar said. “We believe the (Colorado Department of Natural Resources) compromise was good and balanced and can still work.”

Alvillar said the communities and counties that helped develop that compromise represented the public.

Williams has drilled gas wells on private land on top of the plateau since 1988, Alvillar said, and plans another 13 wells there this year.

EnCana spokesman Doug Hock said responsible development and protection of the Roan can coexist.