

2 Colo. congressmen call for delay in drilling on Roan Plateau

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DENVER — Congressmen Mark Udall and John Salazar called for a one-year moratorium on oil and gas exploration on top of the Roan Plateau on Tuesday, saying the federal government needs more time to gather public comment and study alternatives.

The two Democrats asked Congress to delay funds for the Bureau of Land Management to oversee Roan Plateau development for a year and to prevent new projects in the meantime.

"We're very concerned about the top of the Roan," Salazar said. "It's species-rich, it's a beautiful area."

Udall said he is not trying to stop development, just delay it long enough to make sure alternatives are reviewed.

"To take a year time-out seems the right way to proceed," he said.

BLM spokeswoman Jaime Gardner said public hearings on the plans have already consumed seven years. She said the BLM will follow its current orders from Congress to proceed with development unless it gets a new directive.

Greg Schnacke, executive vice president of the Colorado Oil and Gas Association, said the proposed moratorium is a delaying tactic that could drive up the cost of oil and gas and deprive the state of badly needed tax revenues.

"There has certainly been a long, public process," he said.

The plateau, about 200 miles west of Denver, is home to some of Colorado's largest elk and deer herds, mountain lions, bears, peregrine falcons and genetically important native cutthroat trout. The area generates an estimated \$5 million a year for the local economy from hunting, fishing and wildlife watching, according to state wildlife officials.

It also holds enough natural gas for 4 million homes for the next 20 years, according to the Oil and Gas Association.

The delay in drilling atop the plateau was sought by environmental groups, who said drilling there would cause serious damage to wildlife habitat.

"Local sportsmen have consistently noted the importance of this area for its fish and wildlife habitat and its hunting and angling opportunities," said Brian O'Donnell, director of Trout Unlimited's Public Lands Initiative.

The BLM issued a proposed management plan for the Roan Plateau in November 2004 that calls for drilling on top of the plateau.

O'Donnell said without congressional intervention, the area could be leased for oil and gas in the coming months.

He said the time-out would give local communities more time to come up with a plan to protect the Roan.

O'Donnell said the BLM has acknowledged in the past that much of the natural gas beneath the plateau could be accessed using directional drilling techniques from the base.

O'Donnell said development would bring roads that would interrupt big-game migration routes and disturb habitat that's important to deer and elk. He said it also would cause erosion, which can choke the life out of small trout streams.

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