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BLM: Drill the Roan

By GARY HARMON The Daily Sentinel

Saturday, June 09, 2007

Natural gas drilling can move forward on the Roan Plateau under decisions released Friday by the Bureau of Land Management — to the disappointment of environmental organizations and delight of energy companies.

The decisions also sparked anger in the office of Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter, a Democrat, who had sought 120 days to study the plateau drilling proposal drafted by the previous administration of Gov. Bill Owens, a Republican.

"There was no crisis, no imminent reason why the BLM could not have granted a 120-day review period for a new administration," said Ritter spokesman Evan Dreyer. "We are now reviewing all possible options."

The decision flew in the face of requests by Colorado congressional Democrats that the agency withhold action for more comment.

"I'm extremely disappointed and urge BLM to refrain from taking any further action to issue leases on the Roan," said U.S. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., who said he would consult with U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, a Democrat running for the Senate, "to determine what options are available to us to delay the leasing so that our constituents can be heard."

The decisions cover about 70 percent of the 73,602 acres in the Roan Plateau planning area and allow drilling to proceed under plans put forth by the Colorado Department of Natural Resources last year.

That means only 350 acres of the plateau can be drilled at any one time, and no drilling will be allowed on steep slopes.

The plan relies heavily on directional drilling for the plateau and includes protections for view sheds, native plants and the Colorado River cutthroat trout, BLM spokeswoman Jaime Gardner said.

The decisions set aside more than 21,000 acres in areas of critical environmental concern for more consideration. The area includes nearly 5,000 acres in the Anvil Points area, a similar amount in Maggie Gulch, 6,600 acres on the east fork of Parachute Creek and 4,800 acres in the Trapper-Northwater Creek area.

"The BLM clearly followed the law," said Kathy Hall, Western Slope adviser for the Colorado Oil and Gas Association. "They listened to everyone, and it truly is a good proposal."

"We're disappointed that the BLM did not consider the requests of Coloradans that there's no leasing on top of the Roan," said Joe Neuhofer, Western Slope field director for the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

The earliest leasing could begin in early 2008, said David Boyd of the BLM's Glenwood Springs office.

No leasing on the affected areas of the plateau will begin until the bureau completes the public-comment process for the areas of critical environmental concern, Boyd said.

Those areas were inadequately described in the original Federal Register notice, he said.

The process for those lands will begin anew on Monday, he said.

Federal rules require a 60-day public-comment period on those areas, which will require special management, Boyd said.

Only after a decision is made about the areas of critical environmental concern will the bureau begin the six-month process of preparing to lease those lands, he said.

Colorado Sens. Wayne Allard and Ken Salazar sharply disagreed on the BLM decision.

"I don't know as they had much choice," Allard, a Republican, said in an interview, noting that legislation transferring jurisdiction of the Roan Plateau lands under the Naval Oil Shale Reserves 1 and 3 called for development of the natural resources.

"I view the BLM decision as a rubber stamp laid out in the legislation," Allard said.

Salazar, a Democrat, said the BLM had at every step "insisted upon forging ahead in this process, limiting and disregarding public input. The result is that the public and I both remain skeptical, and I will examine all of my options to correct the BLM's misguided misdirection."

Industry and environmental organizations also clashed over the meaning of the original legislation.

"This decision follows the clear instructions that Congress gave to the BLM in 1997 when it transferred management responsibility to the BLM specifically for the purpose of developing the natural gas resources," said Marc W. Smith, executive director of the Independent Petroleum

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Association of Mountain States.

Environmental groups characterized that as a false claim and said that as recently as 2002 the BLM acknowledged there was no such requirement included in the transfer legislation.

A coalition of environmental organizations, The Campaign to Save the Roan Plateau, said it is considering filing suit.

"This has been a multiyear campaign, and all options remain on the table. What this move by the BLM shows, more than anything, is the need for Colorado's congressional delegation to act quickly," said Pete Kolbenschlager of the campaign.

Features of the plan approved by the BLM include:

- More than 50 percent of the Roan Planning Area would include stipulations requiring directional drilling to recover the underlying natural gas;
- Wells must be clustered on multi-well pads not closer than one-half mile apart atop the plateau; and,
- A single oil and gas operator would conduct all operations under a federal unit, which would give the BLM greater control of development.
-

Gary Harmon can be reached via e-mail at gharmon@gjds.com.

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