

New dirt road to plateau's top cuts time, costs



By MIKE McKIBBIN The Daily Sentinel

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PARACHUTE — A winding, steep \$20 million dirt road and tunnel from north of Parachute to the top of the Roan Plateau could save a top natural-gas producer up to \$70 million, a company official said.

Those savings come from much quicker access to private property on Allen Point, where 60 wells have already been drilled and at least 35 more are planned, said Williams Production's Highland Business Unit Manager Blake Roush.

The four-mile long Wheeler Gulch road and tunnel took a year and a half to complete, he said. Peter Kiewit crews bored the tunnel through 3,200 feet of rock, and it opened in mid-May.

Williams used to send crews from Parachute to Rifle, north on Colorado Highway 13 to Rio Blanco County Road 5, west to the Cow Creek Road and then onto the plateau's Rim Road to Allen Point, Roush said. Each of those 90-mile trips took three-and-a-half hours, he said.

"We had drivers on the road for five or six hours on top of a 10- to 12-hour day," Roush said during a recent tour. "That's not good from a safety standpoint alone. Now, we can get a pickup up here in 40 minutes."

Roush said he expects an average of 60 to 70 trucks a day will use the road, with a total savings in fuel and other costs of \$40 million to \$70 million over the development life of the 9,600 acres Williams has leased.

Moving a drilling rig, which requires as many as 50 truck trips, takes approximately three days, he said, and the new road should allow Williams to drill wells during winter.

The tunnel, at an elevation of 8,500 feet, allows two-way traffic, unless a rig is moved through it, he said.

Williams spokeswoman Susan Alvillar said the new road was not built to gain easier access to possible federal gas leases on the plateau.

"We have a 10-year inventory (in and around Parachute and Rulison), so leasing on top is not a show-stopper for us," she said.

Petroleum Development Corp also recently completed another private road to access leases in the Garden Gulch area, west of the new Williams road.

Tyson Johnston with Petroleum Development said the six-mile-long road from Garfield County Road 215 to the top of Garden Gulch also opened in mid-May.

“Our leases in the area, along with other companies in the valley north of Parachute, plus adjacent acreage, made the road necessary,” he said.

He would not say how much the road cost.

Previously, the company routed workers from Parachute to De Beque, north through Logan’s Wash, up a 17 percent to 20 percent grade, to Garden Gulch, Johnston said.

Johnston said as many as 300 trucks a day, mostly pickups, for Petroleum Development, Williams, Marathon Oil, Berry Petroleum and Chevron workers will use the road.

Petroleum Development has drilled approximately 125 wells on the 5,500-plus acres it leases on top.

It plans to drill 40 to 55 wells a year over the next 10 years, Johnston said.

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