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Energy bill language would limit Roan Plateau drilling

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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DENVER - The U.S. House could vote this week on a provision that would ban gas-well drilling on federal land atop the Roan Plateau, a western Colorado landmark prized for both its abundant energy and its backcountry.

Colorado Democratic Reps. Mark Udall and John Salazar inserted the provision into the Energy Independence Act, which was introduced in the House late Monday.

Salazar spokesman Eric Wortman said a vote could come by Friday night.

The Bureau of Land Management has proposed a 20-year plan allowing up to 210 natural gas wells from 13 sites on federal land on the plateau top. The plan envisions up to 1,360 other wells on the sides of the plateau.

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Some wells have already been drilled on private land on the plateau.

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

It also holds enough natural gas for 4 million homes for the next 20 years and could generate hundreds of millions in badly needed tax revenue for the state, according to industry estimates.

Environmental and outdoor-sports groups protested the plan to drill atop the plateau, saying its natural abundant wildlife should be protected.

Udall and Salazar have been pushing for a moratorium, and Gov. Bill Ritter, who took office in January, has more time to study the plan.

Salazar's brother, Democratic Sen. Ken Salazar, last week blocked Senate confirmation of James Caahan's nominee to head the BLM, in hopes of forcing federal officials to accommodate state officials.

The BLM announced its plans in June after seven years of study, hearings and comment from state officials.

Ken Neubecker, vice president of Colorado Trout Unlimited, welcomed the restrictions in the energy bill.

"This is really gratifying," he said.

An industry representative did not immediately return a call.

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