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Ritter buys time on Roan but drilling ban is wrong

By The Denver Post Editorial Board

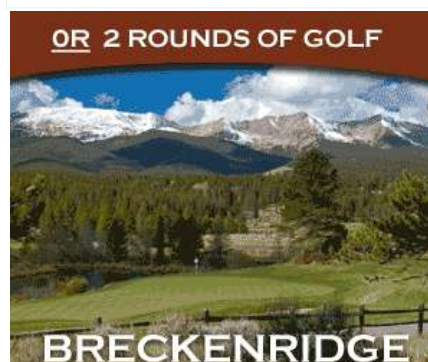
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Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter has won his fight to spend 120 days reviewing federal plans for development on the energy-rich Roan Plateau. He should use the time to craft a common-sense compromise that will assure the maximum benefits to taxpayers and consumers, while minimizing disruption to the area's wildlife and scenic treasures.

The state's new chief executive won't be starting from scratch. The plan unveiled earlier this year by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management was crafted after more than seven years of study, public hearings and work with state and local officials. Among other restrictions, the BLM plan would limit drilling operations to no more than 1 percent of the plateau's surface land at any given time, as recommended by the state's former natural resources director, Russ George. All land disturbed by such operations would have to be eventually reclaimed and restored.

But even though the BLM plan had such a long gestation period, Ritter understandably wanted time for his own experts to review and comment on the plan. Instead of the 120 days he requested, the BLM offered him just 24 days. That prompted a two-front attack on the BLM from Democrats in Colorado's congressional delegation. Reps. John Salazar and Mark Udall added an amendment to the energy bill that passed the House last week that would forbid surface drilling on the federally owned portion of the plateau, which covers the eastern half. The Udall-John Salazar amendment would only allow access to that federal land by horizontal drilling from the base of the plateau, forcing energy companies to drill up to three miles to reach the gas fields - and that could actually increase the risk of harm to the wildlife that use the base of the plateau for their winter range.

Meanwhile, Sen. Ken Salazar put a hold on the nomination of James Caswell as BLM director until the Interior Department agreed to grant Ritter his 120-day review. The BLM recently capitulated and Salazar then lifted that hold.

Now that Ritter has won his point, the Senate should remove the Udall- John Salazar amendment when the two chambers go to conference on the energy bill in September. A total ban on surface drilling would cripple efforts to tap the estimated 8.9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the plateau, which amount to 4 percent of the proven reserves in the United States.

If Ritter tries to insert such a surface drilling ban into the BLM plan, he would trigger a bruising political confrontation with the oil and gas industry, which pumped \$22.9 billion into the state economy in 2005, according to the Colorado School of Mines. He'd also snub the expressed desires of local leaders in the three impacted counties (Rio Blanco, Garfield and Mesa), as well as the influential Western Slope promotional group Club 20 - all of whom have endorsed the BLM plan.

There is certainly room for improvement in the BLM plan, especially as the agency drafts regulations for the 30 percent of federal holdings in the area that

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