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What will wilderness look like?

Conservation groups fear for Roan Plateau as energy drilling expands

Dennis Webb
Vail, CO Colorado
July 16, 2007

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS — As the waters of the East Fork of Parachute Creek tumbled over a 200-foot waterfall Thursday, storm clouds hovered ominously at the far end of the broad canyon that opens up below this scenic landmark of the Roan Plateau.

The clouds' threat was only temporary, but below them could be seen a more serious concern for advocates of keeping the plateau as it is. In the canyon bottom perhaps a mile downstream of the falls, a drilling rig plumbed for the riches of the natural gas formation thousands of feet below.

The rig is on private land, but is one of several edging ever closer to the public lands of the plateau. And now that the Bureau of Land Management has decided to allow drilling on the plateau top, those seeking to protect the plateau worry that the forested landscape of its upper slopes is about to undergo an industrial transformation.

Keith Goddard, who has a hunting outfitting business on the plateau and has fought for years to keep rigs off the top, worries that those in a position to make a difference "have written this area off."

Goddard kicked up dust with his cowboy boots as he led the way down a stock trail to the creek above the falls Thursday. Two staff members with the conservation group Trout Unlimited had filled an SUV with journalists to show them what's at stake on the Roan Plateau, and the drive along its ridges had led to the opportunity to fish in the creek.

It's one of a couple of creeks on the plateau known to hold populations of almost genetically pure populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout. A sizable population of trout lives in Trapper Creek, where the anglers were to visit the next day.

On this afternoon brook trout were far more in evidence, but they were skittish and required patient anglers. Corey Fisher, a Montana resident and energy field coordinator for Trout Unlimited, had taken a long-sleeved shirt because it was spooking a 12-inch brookie. He slowly pursued the fish on hands and knees almost before catching and then releasing his prey.

It was a relaxing break for Fisher and Chris Hunt, an Idaho resident and Trout Unlimited's communications director on public lands issues. But Thursday's media tour was being conducted for more serious reasons, the nomination of U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., to grill James Caswell in Washington that day over his nomination to head the Bureau of Land Management.

Like Goddard, Salazar and Trout Unlimited object to the agency's letting drill rigs on top of the plateau. Salazar said he would place a Senate "hold" on Caswell's nomination until the Department of Interior gives

Outfitter Keith Goddard points out the views from the rim of the Roan Plateau to Texas freelance writer Diana Kunde Thursday. Goddard accompanied Trout Unlimited representatives in leading a media tour on top of the plateau Thursday.

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Dennis Webb/Post Independent

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Bill Ritter, a fellow Democrat, the 120 days he has requested to review the Roan plan.

Far from a wasteland

Hunt's hope for Thursday's tour was to show that the Roan Plateau isn't the "desert wasteland" some representatives have described.



Water spills down the falls of the East Fork of Parachute Creek. The falls are one of the largest in Colorado.

Dennis Webb/Post Independent

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Certainly, the view from below, down in Rifle, can be deceiving. The plateau presents itself as a steep, stark cliff running to the top and climbing thousands of feet.

And the drive on the JQS Road up those cliffs starts out in a pinon and juniper trees and sagebrush. But the vegetation becomes after several switchbacks, until pines and aspen are encountered reaching the plateau top.

Beyond the Roan's rim, the desert gives over entirely to rolling hills full of wildflowers and aspen trees, and valleys running with streams. Grouse, red-tailed hawk, elk and other animals make their place where deer, bear and mountain lion also abound.

"You get up here and it's a totally different world," Hunt said, admiring the size of the aspen trees. "This is signature Colorado, is it not?"

The question is whether gas development could make the plateau look like the heavily drilled landscape in the Colorado River Valley.

Some of the ridge-top jeep roads would be widened to accommodate traffic, and already drill rigs can be seen along ridgelines just outside the Bureau of Land Management's part of the plateau. The smoke issued from one of them Thursday.

Although no rigs have reached the bureau's lands, the traffic from Williams Production was using the road following the plateau. The bureau is looking for drilling sites on private lands on the plateau — something it no longer needs to do now that it has opened up its own on those lands.

Goddard is glad Williams took that step. He is concerned about the impacts of future drilling traffic on the plateau.

Watershed worries

The drilling plan for the plateau calls for rigs to operate from within watershed boundaries to protect watersheds. But Goddard thinks the quarter-mile buffer around creeks is insufficient because many of the creeks are fed by tributaries farther away.

"All you've got to do is screw up one spring and you've lost the watershed," he said.

Fisher, of Trout Unlimited, shares such concerns. He said a chemical spill in Wyoming wiped out one cutthroat trout population.

"Poor land management flows downhill," he said.

Susan Alvillar, of Williams Production, said the company has numerous environmental protection programs in place for its operations, including programs for protecting against spills.

"We've got a myriad of regulations that we follow every day," she said.

She said Williams has 14 wells on top of the Roan now, and is currently drilling.

"We've operated up there since the '80s, and certainly it's on our mind that everything that we do needs to be in accordance with all the regulations and make sure that we don't impact any of our precious resources," she said.



Chris Hunt of Trout Unlimited releases a brook trout that he caught in East Fork of Parachute Creek, not far above where the creek plunges over a 200-foot waterfall.

Dennis Webb/Post Independent

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Alvillar said many who work for Williams are avid hunters and anglers who understand the importance of protecting the environment. She also noted that the Roan plan is “very prescriptive” in aiming to reduce the impacts of drilling.

But that’s not assurance enough for Goddard. He said he gets probably 50 calls a year from hunters hoping to find a place to go where they can enjoy their experience without seeing lots of people, traffic and drilling rigs. For years, he has been able to offer the Roan as one such place.

But with rigs looming on nearby horizons like storm clouds, and the Bureau of Land Management ready to invite them in if its plan withstands political challenges, he knows that may be about to change.

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