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Top interior official visits Roan Plateau

By David Frey/Aspen Daily News Correspondent

EAGLE - The Interior Department's top official overseeing the Bureau of Land Management toured the Roan Plateau near Rifle on Wednesday as the agency prepares a document that will determine what role gas drilling will play on the plateau.

Rebecca Watson, assistant secretary for land and minerals development, visited the plateau with BLM staffers, including State Director Ron Wenker, and with consultants who are writing the document.

Watson is the second high-ranking official to visit the plateau. Last year, BLM Director Kathleen Clarke toured the Roan Plateau with public officials. She said she wanted to give state and local BLM officials the Bush administration's perspective, which she said seeks to balance input from local communities, state officials and national interests.

"I'm telling them what's important is balanced development and listening to what local communities want and trying to address the national needs for natural gas, and at the same time balance the long-term sustainability of the area," Watson said.

A draft environmental impact statement is expected in September that will address how the plateau may be used. Key in the document will be the role of oil and gas on the plateau. That plan was expected early this year, but officials delayed it, Watson said, to work more closely with local governments and the state to try to draft a document they can stand behind. That effort resulted in a new alternative not previously laid out.

The decision is being watched closely. Gas industry representatives say rock formations below the plateau hold one of the nation's most important pockets of natural gas. They believe the plateau sits on about a third of Colorado's natural gas holdings - up to 5 trillion cubic feet, enough to fuel the nation for 2 _ months.

Environmentalists want to block drilling from the plateau's top and its cliffs. They believe gas drilling on the surface would harm plants and animals on the surface, and want to restrict gas drilling to the area below the plateau, where wells are at the densest levels in the state.

Environmentalists say the plateau's 40,000-acre top is home to deer, elk, bears, plant species found nowhere else and a massive waterfall, plus what biologists say is one of the purest strains of native cutthroat trout in the state.

The final document will likely call for some gas development, Wenker said.

"We trying to have a balance of development in a responsible manner as well as trying to protect the environment," he said.

Watson was in Vail for the 50th anniversary of the Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Foundation,

of which she is a member. She said she wanted to take the opportunity to view the plateau, including environmentally-sensitive areas outlined by BLM officials and environmentalists.

She also viewed an area near Eagle where homeowners and BLM officials worked together to clear out timber near a subdivision to lessen fire danger. It's an effort they had been working on for years, officials said, and one that fit with the directives of the recently-passed Healthy Forests Initiative spearheaded by Rep. Scott McInnis.

Watson also visited the memorial to the firefighters killed in the 1994 Storm King fire.

Watson said she wanted to share with local BLM officials a national directive aimed at lessening drilling impacts by seeking "best management practices" that call for such things as drilling multiple wells from one pad, sharing roads among wells and masking roads from communities like Rifle that want their views protected.

"I think this administration, one of the things we emphasize is listening to local communities and working with them. That's an important message I wanted to give to the BLM. Contrary to what you read in the press, it's not oil and gas over everything."

Towns throughout Garfield County asked BLM officials to bar gas drilling from the surface, and Garfield County officials endorsed a similar measure, only to see an alternative in an earlier document that called for no drilling dropped from consideration.

BLM officials said that option will still be included in a range of alternatives that officials may choose from when the draft is released.

As environmentalists wait for the draft plan, they're girding up their opposition. They've begun visiting area town councils with a computer simulation of what drilling impacts on the surface could look like and are preparing studies on possible impacts to plants and animals and a separate review of gas potential under the plateau. They're also organizing tours of the plateau.

Steve Smith, of the Wilderness Society, said he was glad Watson visited the area.

"I have confidence that anyone who visits up there will see the surprising natural values, the ecological diversity that's up there, and could hardly help but be inspired to preserve it," he said.

The visit shows that the Roan Plateau is gaining national attention, said Pete Kolbenschlag, of the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

"Citizens in Colorado and really all across the country should take heart that the right pressure applied the right ways gets folks' attention, even all the way back to Washington, D.C.," he said.

Kolbenschlag said his group is getting ready to respond to the environmental impact statement when it's released.

Officials said they hope local communities will back the initiative, but are ready for opposition.

"We're looking forward to this draft coming out in the fall," Watson said, "and having a really robust public discussion about it."