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Diverse voices call on the BLM to “do the right thing” for Roan Plateau Save Roan Campaign and partners submit DEIS comments

GLENWOOD SPRINGS—Today an alliance of citizens, businesses, conservation and recreation groups, and local elected officials issued comments on the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) draft Roan Plateau Resource Management Plan Amendment and draft environmental impact statement (or “DEIS”), which is currently available for public review and comment. The comment deadline is Monday, April 11.

In their comments, the Campaign called on the BLM to adopt the recommendations of the Community Alternative, a middle-ground plan that would allow for large scale natural gas development and protect the Plateau’s most important features. Many members of the Campaign as well as diverse recreation, fish and wildlife groups—such as the Colorado Wildlife Federation, Colorado Mule Deer Association and Trout Unlimited—are also submitting separate, more detailed comments to the BLM on the draft plan.

“Roan Plateau is an important landmark to our communities. Our residents appreciate the wide range of uses the Plateau provides and are worried that these other popular public uses will be shut out if the Plateau becomes another gas field,” said Doug Williams, trustee with the Town of Silt. “We understand the impacts—positive and negative—of living around energy development. The Community Alternative honors local community input and concern by ensuring that some places remain as they are, for wildlife habitat, recreation, and as natural landscapes to provide for our changing, diverse economies. We are asking for a fair balance: we ask the BLM to do the right thing for local residents and communities, support the Community Alternative.”

During the nearly four year planning process to date, governments have been at the forefront of local efforts to save Roan Plateau. Since the draft plan was released last November, the Garfield County municipalities of Silt, New Castle, and Carbondale have unanimously passed resolutions supporting the provisions of the Community Alternative. The City of Glenwood Springs City Council voted to oppose drilling on top of the Plateau, one of the Community Alternative’s four key provisions.

Fish and wildlife groups have also called for a balanced plan. To date, the National Wildlife Federation, Colorado Wildlife Federation, Colorado Mule Deer Association, Trout Unlimited, and Colorado Outfitters Association, have all expressed support for the Community Alternative. In its comments, the Campaign has urged the BLM to adopt strong protections for the Plateau’s many important biological values, including critical and sensitive habitats and wildlife seclusion areas.

“We appreciate all the work that the BLM and its cooperators have put into this planning process. However, we are very concerned about the high level of potential impacts to fish and wildlife, especially the resident mule deer herd. This herd is already over 30% below objectives. Unless the BLM selects a plan that commits adequate conditions and restrictions to safeguard fawning and wintering habitat, migration routes, and seclusion areas, the impacts could be devastating to the deer population”, said Dennis Buechler of the Colorado Wildlife Federation. “Industry should prove they can develop this gas responsibly below the rim before leasing is allowed on top. Thus, we urge BLM to adopt the provisions of the Community Alternative.”

The value of Roan Plateau for local residents has been well articulated during the planning process. Hunting alone on Roan Plateau brings in \$3.8 million annually to Garfield County, and the area is rich in other recreation as well. The comments urge the BLM to proactively manage the area’s important recreational opportunities and to designate two recreation areas, one below and one above the rim.

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“Roan Plateau is a recreational wonderland, providing outstanding hunting, backpacking, camping, and scenic driving—uses that will likely be lost or at the least severely harmed—by intensive oil and gas development,” said Vera Smith, conservation director with the Colorado Mountain Club. “We ask the BLM not to take away the recreational experiences that we all enjoy today on the Roan Plateau but instead preserve them by adopting the Community Alternative.”

Drilling is booming across Colorado’s Western Slope, with at least 10,000 wells projected already for the lower Piceance Basin. Energy production will be an important piece of local economies for decades to come. On the other hand, a growing body of evidence documents the importance of nearby protected public lands to healthy, vibrant western communities. As the population continues to grow, economic contributors such as attracting retirees and new businesses, recreation and tourism, quality-of-life amenities, and protecting property values, are becoming increasingly important to local economies. The Community Alternative would strike a balance, allowing for large-scale energy development to continue, while also protecting the other important community values of Roan Plateau.

“Western Colorado is at a crossroads. What do we want our future to look like? We can look to the past, and embrace a single industry as our economic savior, or we can push for a real balance on our public lands, one that promotes new energy technologies and diverse economies. We don’t need to drill everywhere, all at once, and we certainly don’t need to drill on the Roan Plateau. Garfield County should not become an energy sacrifice zone,” said Randy Udall with the Community Office of Resource Efficiency. Natural gas exports have increased twentyfold since 1990; the state is doing its part to meet the nation’s energy appetite. We need to strike a balance between energy production and other critical community and economic values. The Community Alternative would help ensure this, allowing for large-scale energy production to continue, while also protecting the area’s natural landscapes and undeveloped public lands, for our new emerging economies.”

The Campaign’s comments lay out specific recommendations—the Community Alternative—based on components in the draft, and ask that these be adopted as its final plan. The Community Alternative is not about stopping gas production in the Planning Area. In fact, it is about producing very significant volumes of gas during the life of the management plan while protecting the best natural features and habitats of the area.

“When it kicked off this planning process, the BLM pledged to craft a community-supported plan. We offer such a plan, a compromise, which would allow large amounts of natural gas to be developed and protect the area’s top, cliffs, recreation lands and sensitive habitats. It is the win-win solution that communities have long supported and BLM should too,” said Pete Kolbenschlag with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “If the agency does not select such provisions, the plan as it is simply cannot support a final decision.”

The comments argue that the BLM’s failure to account for likely energy development and the flawed discussion of impacts is a breach of the agency’s legal obligation to take a “hard look” and to provide a thoughtful comparison that allows the public and decision-makers to make an informed choice. The comments argue that the BLM has failed to put likely energy development into the proper context, both in terms of projecting what this development will entail over the twenty year life of the plan, and in terms of what such might mean for local economies and other social considerations. Unless the agency selects a final plan that includes the strongest protections for Roan Plateau’s important public and natural resources—the comments conclude—the BLM must redo its analysis and present new alternatives to the public prior to selecting a final plan.

Since the current comment period began in November, over 65,000 comments have been received by the BLM, most favoring the provisions of the Community Alternative. After the comment period on the draft ends, the BLM will meet with several local governments and agencies that are “cooperating agencies” to review public comments received. The agency will then issue a final plan, or decide to supplement its plan with a new draft, before making a final decision. The public and interested parties who commented on the draft will have at least one more chance to provide comments, and the Colorado Governor is also granted a review, before the decision is issued. Once issued, the decision can be challenged administratively and in Federal court.