

## **Feds: Users of Roan will have to adapt** ***Energy development means change in area is inevitable***

By BOBBY MAGILL The Daily Sentinel  
Friday, September 15, 2006

ROAN PLATEAU — From the pool beneath the waterfall on the East Fork of Parachute Creek, it's difficult to see the energy development on nearby private land.

The stream is rugged and remote, the shale is brittle and the stream still tumbles clearly toward the Colorado River.

Despite a cattle road winding down into the canyon, the area remains relatively wild. Atop the plateau, hunters' camps are clustered here and there along the muddy dirt roads winding beneath the aspens.

But look far down canyon, and you can see a natural gas well pad in a bend in the canyon on private land.

Like the landscape itself, the truth about the likely future of the Roan is in the details.

If the Bureau of Land Management approves unchanged its final management plan amendment for the Roan, the hiking, hunting and four-wheeling popular on the plateau will be forced to adapt to the progress and impact of the energy industry.

The BLM on Sept. 7 issued its plan amendment for the 73,602-acre Roan Plateau Planning Area, which opens the Roan to restricted energy development, keeping all drilling activity on top of the Roan to high ridges.

The agency is allowing a 30-day public-protest period on the plan amendment before it becomes official.

Greater than 70,000 public comments of the more than 74,000 the BLM received concerning the 2004 draft plan amendment favored prohibiting leasing atop the Roan. Most of those comments supported "undeveloped recreation settings" on the plateau, according to the plan.

The final plan amendment says "the BLM has concluded that management to accommodate substantial oil and gas development precludes maintaining characteristics specific to undeveloped recreation settings."

Instead, the final plan would manage the Roan as an "extensive recreation management area," which requires recreational activities to adjust to natural gas development.

"As the physical, social and administrative settings change, some recreational activities, experiences, and benefit opportunities would be lost, and some visitors who prefer those recreation settings would be displaced," the plan amendment says.

Hunters and outfitters and the big game they hunt will be some of those displaced, the amendment says.

When the BLM and state officials rolled out the plan during a Battlement Mesa news conference, they said the plan wouldn't please everybody.

"It's a compromise and a balance of competing resource uses," BLM spokesman David Boyd said Thursday.

The energy industry will be allowed to disturb the surface of 35,191 acres within the planning area, so long as no more than 350 acres are disturbed at any one time. For industry to develop beyond 350 acres, it must reclaim land previously developed.

Kathy Hall, a consultant for the Colorado Oil and Gas Association said Thursday that 350 acres is “practically nothing.”

“I don’t see how it would be a big disturbance,” she said.

Reclaimed areas and the “nice grass” that would likely be planted there provide good wildlife habitat, she said.

“The wildlife love it,” she said.

The BLM proposes to create four protected “areas of critical environmental concern,” of which the waterfall on the East Fork is a part.

That designation attempts to preserve the “natural character” of the four areas and protect their wildlife habitat, the plan amendment says.

The four protected areas, which also include the Anvil Points, Magpie Gulch, and an area along Trapper and Northwater creeks, will be managed to protect raptor habitat, scenic value, ecological integrity, soil stability and other qualities.

But four years ago, other options were considered for undeveloped recreation on the plateau when the BLM presented six “preliminary alternatives” to the public during meetings in Rifle, Parachute and Glenwood Springs.

Four of those alternatives called for the designation of at least two wilderness study areas on the Roan totaling between 11,000 and more than 21,380 acres.

Wilderness study areas must be managed as wilderness, no mechanized vehicles or roads allowed, until Congress can officially designate them as wilderness areas.

But the plan says those alternatives may not have conformed to the 1997 act that transferred the Naval Oil Shale reserves on the Roan to the BLM.

The agency modified and combined the “major components” of those alternatives, excluding the parts that would have created wilderness study areas, and formed the five alternatives that appeared in the 2004 draft plan.

But the BLM couldn’t designate any part of the Roan Plateau a wilderness study area, Boyd said, because in a 2003 settlement with the state of Utah, the agency agreed it doesn’t have the legal authority to designate wilderness study areas on its land anywhere in the country even though it had been doing so for decades.

Pete Kolbenschlager of the Colorado Environmental Coalition said the wilderness study area designation is the only tool the BLM has to comprehensively protect any wilderness character on land it manages.

“When you look at the wilderness lands proposed by citizens and how many of those were leased in western Colorado, the only areas left unleased are the wilderness study areas,” he said.

The BLM, he said, is “getting top-down pressure to lease as many of their lands as possible.”

When much of northwest Colorado is being developed for energy, “people understand some places can be free from that,” he said.

More than half the Roan planning area would fall under “no surface occupancy” stipulations, meaning the energy industry would have to access its leases there without touching the surface of the land.

After a 30-day public-notice period, an environmental assessment and a decision that the stipulation is no longer required to protect the area, the BLM can waive any stipulation in the plan.

The plan amendment says that in 20 years, about 13 natural gas well pads and 210 wells will likely be constructed atop the plateau, with 180 well pads and 1,360 wells below the rim.

But those figures are estimates.

“The plan (amendment) doesn’t limit the number of wells and the number of well pads,” Boyd said. It “limits the spacing and where they can put them in. (There is) no number that says only 210 wells on top.”

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