

BLM plan calls for drilling Roan *Work to be done in sensitive way, feds say*

By BOBBY MAGILL The Daily Sentinel
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BATTLEMENT MESA — In two decades, an aerial view of the Roan Plateau could reveal nearly 200 natural gas well pads dotted along the much-contested plateau's high ridges and below its rim.

But if a plan the Bureau of Land Management unveiled Thursday is approved, some of the Roan Plateau's surface will be saved from any disturbance created by natural gas development while allowing 90 percent of the gas available beneath the plateau to be extracted.

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The plan BLM officials unveiled Thursday in Battlement Mesa is technically called the Roan Plateau Planning Area Resource Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement.

Its drafters called it "innovative."

The final plan, a 2004 draft that elicited nearly 75,000 public comments, is a model for how a cooperative effort involving multiple state agencies and local governments can succeed, Department of Natural Resources Executive Director Russell George said.

"We think it may be so good that it bears study for other sensitive areas," he said.

BLM State Director Sally Wisely said the plan will protect wildlife habitat and ecologically sensitive areas.

All told, nearly 35,200 acres will be available for gas development facilities over 20 years, but the plan limits total development to 13 natural gas well pads and 210 wells on top of the Roan Plateau, and 180 well pads and 1,360 wells beneath the rim.

The gas company drilling in the 73,602-acre Roan Plateau Planning Area will have to use directional drilling techniques so more than one well can fit on a single pad.

That way, wildlife habitat fragmentation can be reduced, according to the plan.

Well pads are to be spaced one-half mile apart.

The proposed plan limits surface disturbance from natural gas development to 1 percent of the planning area at a time.

Only one natural gas company will be allowed to operate in the planning area at any time, and that company's roads and well pads atop the plateau will be concentrated on its high ridges.

Before the company can build more roads and well pads, it must reclaim some previously built roads and well pads so that no more than 350 acres of land is disturbed at any one time.

"No surface occupancy" stipulations will be placed on 51 percent of the plateau's planning area, which means gas wells will have to be developed using directional drilling from a distant well pad without disturbing the surface of the land.

More than 21,000 acres will receive some protections as four “areas of critical environmental concern,” including land around the Anvil Points, Magpie Gulch, the East Fork of Parachute Creek, Trapper Creek and Northwater Creek.

In its proposed plan, the BLM claims the stipulations placed on natural gas development will preserve the view of the Roan Plateau from Interstate 70 and preserve the natural landscape around the waterfall and box canyon on the East Fork of Parachute Creek.

Future oil shale development on the Roan would have to follow similar stipulations as those imposed on gas development unless the land-use plan for the area is modified.

The Department of Natural Resources and other state agencies and local governments spent more than a year working with the BLM trying to create a way to manage the Roan Plateau so its scenery and wildlife habitat could be conserved while also fulfilling Congress’ 1997 mandate to lease the Roan for natural gas.

George said the plan isn’t perfect.

“It is impossible to give everybody what they want,” he said.

One group that didn’t get what it wanted was the local communities who implored the BLM to prevent the Roan from being leased at all, said Steve Smith of the Wilderness Society.

He called the various stipulations restricting drilling on the plateau “creative,” saying the provisions are merely guidelines the BLM may be hard-pressed to enforce for lack of money.

If the BLM can’t protect the plateau under the new plan, then it needs to be challenged, he said.

Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., lashed out at the proposed plan in a news release Thursday, saying he’s disappointed the BLM insisted on allowing energy development atop the Roan.

He called the BLM and the state’s ideas for minimizing energy development’s effect on the plateau “unproven.”

“Nevertheless, I am very disappointed that the BLM declined my request to present these new ideas for public comment before the lands are leased for oil and gas development,” Salazar said. “New drilling techniques may allow us in the future to tap into these resources from the sides or base of the plateau. There is no need to rush to lease these precious lands for immediate development.”

Colorado Oil and Gas Association consultant Kathy Hall said the BLM “bent over backwards” to work with local communities and the natural gas industry.

She said time will tell whether the plan gives industry enough access to the Roan so gas can be extracted there easily.

“It’s new and innovative,” she said. But, “Russ (George) said it was a compromise.”

Once the proposed plan is published in the Federal Register on Sept. 15, the public has 30 days to protest it, and Gov. Bill Owens has 60 days to review it.

No date is set for when the BLM will make a final decision on the plan, but it may take a while, Wisely said, because the agency must respond to each protest.

The draft and final versions of the proposed plan are available online at www.blm.gov/rmp/co/roanplateau/.

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