



# The Wilderness Society

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## **ANALYSIS SHOWS INTERIOR DEPARTMENT OVERSTATED ROAN PLATEAU'S GAS POTENTIAL BY MORE THAN 3,000%**

DENVER, CO (October 27, 2004) – A new analysis shows that The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) dramatically exaggerated the potential for gas production from the Roan Plateau Planning Area, a prized Colorado recreation area that has been controversially targeted for increased drilling. The Wilderness Society found that the BLM's gas projection for the Roan Plateau Planning Area was 38 times larger than an estimate based on the federal government's most recent data.

“Although the administration claims that the Roan Plateau Planning Area contains 15 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the latest numbers from its own scientists suggest that less than one half a trillion cubic feet exist there.” said Dr. Pete Morton, a Wilderness Society economist. “Estimating undiscovered resources is an uncertain process, but a difference of more than 3,000 percent draws into question the accuracy of the data and assumptions used in the administration’s analysis.”

The Wilderness Society scientists reviewed data generated by the U.S. Geological Survey in 2002 in support of the Bush administration’s Energy Policy Conservation Act (EPCA) report. In the “EPCA” report, the government assessed the gas potential of five major regions in the Rocky Mountains, including the Uinta-Piceance basin of northwest Colorado and northwest Utah, which includes the Roan Plateau. When the BLM created its gas projection for Roan Plateau, however, instead of using the most recent U.S. Geological Survey data (data that was the basis for the administration’s EPCA report), the BLM selected data from a 1998 Department of Energy report and a 1994 USGS report.

The BLM estimates also exaggerate the volume of Roan Plateau gas relative to gas in the surrounding region. “With very clumsy math, the BLM illogically asserts that 53 percent of the gas in the entire 18.9 million acres of the Uinta-Piceance Basin is found under the Roan Plateau Planning Area’s 127,000 acres,” said Steve Smith, Assistant Regional Director for The Wilderness Society. “That is a preposterous claim.” The Wilderness Society analysis indicates the Roan Plateau contains less than 2 percent of the technically recoverable gas in the Uinta- Piceance Basin.

“Whether through error or design, the BLM’s flawed estimates support the gas and oil industry’s most extreme drilling scenario, rather than striking a sensible balance between drilling and conservation of pristine wildlands,” said Dr. Morton.

The BLM is threatening to ignore a broadly supported plan that would allow drilling on thousands of acres that surround Roan Plateau while protecting the biologically rich plateau itself, which is known for its backcountry recreation, hunting, and fishing. The Wilderness Society cautioned that the exaggerated or inaccurate gas estimates for Roan Plateau Planning Area will ultimately harm local communities and permanently damage the western landscape, clean water and air, and critical wildlife habitat. “With data errors of this magnitude, one wonders if the BLM is being forced to practice ‘political science’ as opposed to ‘geophysical science,’” said Morton.

“Again and again, the government and industry team up to project big booms of energy production in the west, promising elaborate numbers of new jobs and huge boosts to local economies,” Morton said. “We

saw it in the faulty oil-shale estimates that wreaked havoc in Colorado two decades ago, and we saw it in recently discredited estimates from companies that include Shell and El Paso. Unless gas projections are accurate and tempered in economic and technological reality, counties and towns cannot properly plan for the future.”

Dr. Morton points out that The Wilderness Society’s conclusion -- that the Bush administration has exaggerated the amount of gas recoverable from public land in the Rocky Mountains -- is supported by a recent paper published in the Oil and Gas Journal. In that paper, several seasoned veterans of the gas industry conclude “...it is likely that resource volumes (for tight sands gas in the Rockies) are substantially overestimated, while the risks associated with finding and recovering those resources have most certainly been underestimated.”<sup>1</sup>

An April 2004 report issued by The Wilderness Society showed that 70% of the federal public lands already leased in Colorado for oil and gas development are not in production and that only 19,000 of 25,000 wells permitted in five Western states have been drilled. According to Dr. Michelle Haefele, who worked on the Wilderness Society study, “With 24 million acres of public land already leased but not in production, there is simply no reason to drill on the top of the Roan Plateau, or for that matter, in the many other wild places in the west that are threatened by gas and oil drilling.”

Whatever volume of gas exists under Roan Plateau Planning Area, BLM projects that 86 percent of the gas that will actually be produced there over the next 20 years will be available without any drilling on top of the plateau itself.

According to Garfield County (CO) Commissioner Tresi Houpt, “After spending two years in discussion with the BLM on the potential production of resources as part of the management plan for the Roan Plateau, it is my opinion that the BLM can satisfy their resource development requirements by isolating future drilling around the base of the Plateau where drilling is currently occurring, rather than on top of the Plateau. Spot drilling, which has been suggested throughout the process for the purpose of preserving environmentally significant areas, would be destructive well beyond the areas identified for resource extraction. The infrastructure necessary to extract natural resources is extensive. Supporting road systems, pipelines, compression stations and the potential for water treatment ponds or evaporation pits illustrate the extensive impact a single well pad can have on a locale. We, as a county, have requested that the BLM illustrate the actual need for drilling on top of the Roan Plateau. I anticipate receiving a response to this request in the next draft management plan, but am anticipating that they too will find that at this time it is unnecessary to disturb the top of the Roan Plateau.”

“As Colorado’s population continues to grow, we need to make cautious, well-informed decisions about the environment,” said The Wilderness Society’s Smith. “This is especially true when we’re talking about a Western treasure like the Roan Plateau, which already provides tremendous economic and recreational benefits to the region. The BLM’s faulty estimates, coupled with the great existing surplus of undrilled leases, suggest that we need to move slowly on decisions about Roan’s future.”

The Wilderness Society’s *GIS Analysis of the Economically Recoverable Gas Available Underneath the Roan Plateau* is available at <http://www.wilderness.org/NewsRoom/Release/20041027.cfm>

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<sup>1</sup> Shanley, K.W.; Robinson, J.; Cluff, R.M. 2004. “Tight-gas myths, realities have strong implications for resource estimation, policymaking, operating strategies.” Oil and Gas Journal, August 2, 2004