

THE LAND LETTER

OIL AND GAS: BLM's lease sale plan for Roan Plateau parcels sparks outcry

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April Reese, *Land Letter* Western reporter

The Bureau of Land Management announced earlier this week that it plans to offer about 55,000 acres on Colorado's Roan Plateau for oil and gas leasing, despite ardent opposition to the plan and pending legislation that would require a more gradual approach to leasing and expanded protections for wildlife habitat in the area.

The Aug. 14 lease sale will include 31 parcels totaling 55,186 acres on the plateau; 18 of those parcels, comprising about 34,000 acres, are on the top of the plateau. But the leases will come with "strict stipulations" to protect the area's wildlife habitat, streams and scenic views, according to BLM's announcement. For leases on the top of the plateau, drilling will be phased in over time, and infrastructure such as roads, pipelines and power lines will be consolidated to reduce the footprint of development, BLM officials said.



The Roan Plateau's canyon and ridge topography creates breathtaking views. Courtesy of BLM.

The lease sale will offer areas identified for leasing in BLM's highly controversial resource management plan for the Roan Plateau in northwestern Colorado. Despite widespread opposition, BLM announced in March that it would stand by the plan ([Greenwire](#), March 20).

News of the impending lease sale sparked an outcry from the plan's many critics, many of whom support legislation pending in Congress that would require BLM to take a more protective approach to development on the plateau.

Roan, why would the BLM choose to lease now?" exclaimed Suzanne O'Neill, executive director for the Colorado Wildlife Federation.

"With so many people -- sportsmen, Governor Ritter, our congressional delegation and many others -- all working to create a better plan for the

Colorado Sen. Ken Salazar (D) and Reps. Mark Udall (D) and John Salazar (D) have introduced a bill in Congress that would modify BLM's management plan. Under the bill, which is based on a proposal by Gov. Bill Ritter (D), BLM would have to lease one area at a time, instead of the entire area at once, as it plans to do in the Aug. 14 auction. The measure calls for about 90 percent of the natural gas on the Roan to be extracted using state-of-the-art technology. It would also expand the wildlife protection area, which would be off-limits to development, to 39,000 acres from the 21,034 acres in BLM's plan.

The bill would ensure that stipulations for areas subject to "no surface occupancy" would be non-waivable. Environmental groups have criticized BLM for attaching stipulations to a lease and then granting an operator's request to waive them.

Supporters of the bill reacted to the news of the lease sale with chagrin. "The BLM's plan ignores a set of sensible recommendations for the protection of wildlife habitat, the environment and other recreational

resources that Governor Ritter and the state of Colorado developed last year, and which I have included in legislation that I have introduced in the U.S. Senate," Sen. Salazar said in a statement.

"My administration spent months crafting a bipartisan, uniquely Colorado plan that calls for phased leasing of the Roan over time," Ritter added.

BLM's decision to go ahead and lease the entire area at once will also "vastly shortchange" the state, Ritter added. Under current law, the state is prohibited from receiving any of the bonus payments if the Roan is leased this summer. The pending legislation would allow the state to receive those payments.

"I support this legislation, and the BLM owes it to the people of Colorado to allow it to move through the legislative process before leasing the Roan," Ritter said.

Rep. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) said he was disappointed with BLM's move, but vowed to keep pushing the legislation. "It's disappointing but not a surprise, because the Bush administration has consistently refused to listen to the communities on the Western Slope," he said. "I will continue to fight for legislation that would require BLM to follow the plan proposed by Governor Ritter."

David Boyd, a spokesman for BLM's northwestern Colorado office in Glenwood Springs, said the agency is simply following the intent of federal laws already on the books. In 1997, Congress directed BLM to lease the former Naval Oil Shale Reserve, which includes much of the Roan Plateau.

"We have specific direction from Congress to lease the Roan," Boyd said. The new leases will be the first issued for the area since 8,000 acres were leased -- all below the rim -- under the congressional directive in 1999.

BLM approved a final management plan in March that projects drilling 1,570 wells from 193 drilling sites on the plateau over the next 20 years. The plan allows 210 wells on top of the plateau, but development would be done in stages so that no more than 1 percent of the federal land would be disturbed at any one time ([Land Letter](#), April 10). Boyd said the plan's goals are essentially the same as those in the governor's proposal.

Habitat concerns

But critics said BLM is planning to lease important habitat. Dave Nickum, executive director of Colorado Trout Unlimited, said the August lease sale could lead to drilling in watersheds inhabited by the Colorado River cutthroat trout.

"The BLM's own evaluation of the cutthroat watersheds says they need full protection," Nickum said. "Now they are moving forward with leasing that will allow drilling in these same watersheds."

Trout Unlimited and 19 other hunting and fishing groups that have organized as Sportsmen for the Roan Plateau are also concerned about the effects of oil and gas development on populations of mule deer and elk, which inhabit the top of the plateau in the summer and the lower elevations around the plateau in the winter.

Boyd said that while oil and gas development is bound to have some effect on fish and wildlife habitat, BLM has gone to great lengths to ensure those impacts are minimized as much as possible. Many of the leases will include



Drilling operations at Roan Plateau. Courtesy of BLM.

stipulations to protect sensitive areas, and the agency is unlikely to grant exceptions to those stipulations during drilling, he said.

Boyd also defended the agency's decision to lease the entire area at once, which is at odds with Ritter's proposal. Doing so will allow BLM to require one operator to be responsible for all the leases, even if they are held by several different companies. "That creates a lot of incentives to drill efficiently and keep the footprint down, and reclaim disturbed areas as soon as possible," Boyd explained.

He also argued that Ritter's proposal to phase in leasing would result in multiple operators drilling wells, with each of them installing its own infrastructure, creating a larger industrial footprint.

Whichever company oversees the leases issued in the Aug. 14 sale will have to reclaim developed lands before moving on to the next phase of development, Boyd added. "We think phased development offers more environmental protection on the top," he said.

Critics, including Gov. Ritter, indicated they may protest the lease sale. Protests must be submitted by July 30.

Meanwhile, the Salazars and Udall say they will try to move forward with their Roan Plateau bills, although Sen. Salazar has acknowledged that in the current political climate in the Senate, and in the midst of a public outcry over high fuel prices, it could be a tough fight. The senator was unsuccessful in a bid last year to add language to the omnibus spending bill that would have barred surface drilling on the Roan Plateau in fiscal 2008 ([Land Letter](#), April 10).

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