

Correction & Clarification

Article:

Surge seen in oil, gas drilling

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Surge seen in oil, gas drilling

Group predicts 50,000 new wells

A Wilderness Society study says the BLM has been forced to violate its "multiple-use" mandate.

By Mike Soraghan
Denver Post Staff Writer

Washington — A Bush administration program to accelerate the rezoning of public lands for energy development is expected to lead to more than 50,000 new wells in the West, according to an environmental group's study set for release today.

About 43,000 of the new wells would be in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana, while fewer than 500 would be located on the Roan Plateau in Colorado, where earlier drilling proposals have faced strong opposition.

There's no timetable for when the new wells might come on-line. The planning documents only make the new drilling sites possible, but the sites would be in addition to the nearly 70,000 wells already on federally owned lands.

All the wells were accelerated under an initiative in which Bureau of Land Management administrators selected 21 resource-management plans already underway to be reclassified as "time-sensitive plans."

Of those 21 plans, 11 involved oil and gas drilling. BLM administrators also ordered that environmental protections in those areas be applied in the "least restrictive" manner. About half of these plans are still in development, but once approved by the BLM, a resource-management plan cannot be appealed

"Rezoning" sounds like change. These planning areas have experienced oil and natural gas development for decades. Further, BLM has no authority to "rezone." The agency prepares land use plans with public participation (including the Wilderness Society) pursuant to federal law. NEPA and FLPMA prevent any administration from influencing the preparation of these documents.

"Wells" were not accelerated. Resources were provided to BLM for the preparation of the planning documents pursuant to federal law. A cursory review of any RMP will explain that well proposals are addressed on a site specific basis complying with several environmental laws such as National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Resource Conservation and Recover Act, the Endanger Species Act, Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

"Environmental protections" were not to "be applied in the 'least restrictive' manner." Mitigation requirements were to be "the least restrictive to accomplish the desired [resource] protection." Instruction Memorandum 2003-233. This is consistent with long-standing departmental policy. See H1601-1 Land Use Planning Handbook Rel. 1-1667 issued 11/22/00, Superseded by Rel. 1-1693, March 11, 2005 (stating that leasing stipulations are to be applied in the least restrictive way to achieve resource objectives). See also H-1624-1 Planning for Fluid Mineral Resources, issued 5/7/90.

Federal agencies do not have appellate jurisdiction over other agencies. However, RMPs can be appealed to the Director of BLM. See 43 CFR 1610.5-2

REZONE: 50,000 more oil, gas wells expected

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to another government agency, although they are sometimes challenged in court. Individual projects, however, are subject to environmental review.

The Wilderness Society, a national conservation group, analyzed the accelerated plans and concluded that the Bush administration had forced the BLM to violate its "multiple-use" mandate to balance environmental, recreational and commercial interests by devoting millions of acres exclusively to energy development.

"We expected to see an obvious effort to open up more land to drilling," said Nada Culver, who did the study with another Wilderness Society researcher. "We were surprised by the magnitude of change they're trying to effect in such a short time."

BLM officials said they conducted a thorough planning process and stressed that the final number of wells will be determined only after site-by-site environmental reviews. They also said the current price crunch shows how badly the natural gas is needed.

"Part of our goal at BLM is to provide a reliable supply of affordable energy for America's families and businesses," said agency spokeswoman Celia Boddington. "This is something that hits home in people's pocket-book."

Boddington also rejected the accusation that the BLM is violating its multiple-use mandate, noting that many of the time-sensitive plans were done to promote recreation on public lands.

Resource-management plans are guides to how the BLM will manage a certain area for 15 to 20 years. The zoning documents for BLM's millions of acres balance uses such as off-road vehicles, hiking preservation and energy development, according to the agency's website.

The Clinton administration started the effort to revise BLM planning documents in 2000. Many of the plans had not been revised since the 1980s, and in the meantime, President Clinton had used the 1906 Antiquities Act to designate several new national monuments in the West for the BLM to manage, including the Canyons of the Ancients in Colorado's Four Corners area.

The Bush administration continued the effort, although the White House whittled down the list of plans it wanted to concentrate on and added the mandate to develop new energy sources, which was part of National Energy Plan released in May 2001.

The 11 time-sensitive plans that include oil and gas development call for a total of 76,810 wells, which is more than three times the 24,145 wells that were expected to be drilled prior to the document revisions.

That's also more than all the wells on BLM lands today: 68,608 as of Sept. 30, 2004, the latest date for which figures were available.

The biggest changes were in the Powder River Basin area in Wyoming and Montana, where the BLM chose to increase the number of wells by 43,000.

In Colorado, the Roan Plateau is considered a time-sensitive plan that calls for an increase of 469 wells, though the final plan has not been completed.

Culver said the Roan Plateau is an example of how time-sensitive plans were slowed by local opposition. About 90 percent of comments to the BLM opposed drilling in the environmentally sensitive top of the Roan Plateau in Garfield County.

The agency is proceeding with plans that involve drilling on top of the plateau, and the plan is two years behind schedule, according to the study.

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Violate its multiple use mandate? Compare acres used by oil and gas operations with other uses of federal lands: Oil and gas operations occupy one-twelfth of the land designated as BLM wilderness study areas. Source: BLM

Oil and gas leases apply to minerals and are otherwise open for other uses (camping, OHV, hunting, fishing, etc.). The Wilderness Society's public statements support this.

Whittled down to 21 plans, barely half of which have energy. Seems like a balanced approach to land use planning. Further, there is no such mandate in the National Energy Plan released in May 2001.

These plans don't "call" for the development. They analyze the impacts of potential development. Source: NEPA, FLPMA

Cumulatively, the total number of wells, even if developed, will occupy less than 0.5% of BLM surface lands. Source: BLM. Since some of these will be on FS or split estate lands, the number is reduced further.

Environmentally sensitive top? The Roan Plateau has 250 miles of roads on top. Source: Roan Plateau Draft RMP. Further, the one-third of the top that is privately held is being developed for natural gas today.

Guides, not mandates. They're flexible. Source: FLPMA.