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Environmental analysis: Oil-gas drilling feasible at less cost to habitats

By **Patty Henetz**
 The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 10/15/2007 07:16:53 AM MDT

Conservationists preparing to weigh in on a new look at wilderness-quality lands around the Book Cliffs, the Uinta Mountains and Uinta Basin say federal managers have a unique opportunity to benefit wildlife with relatively small changes in plans for energy drilling and motorized recreation.

The Vernal field office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management last week issued a report on hundreds of thousands of acres previously surveyed for their wilderness potential. A 2006 federal court ruling that found the agency had illegally sold energy leases on wilderness-quality lands required the new analysis.

The report, which supplements the 2005 Vernal BLM Draft Resource Management Plan, offers a fifth alternative for the BLM to consider while making land use decisions for the next 10 to 15 years. And while it appears to have little chance of wholesale adoption, a Wilderness Society official says the agency ought to do just that.

Already contentious, the 2005 draft becomes more so with the supplement, which could heighten tensions in a long-running battle between conservationists, motorized recreation enthusiasts and energy companies that want to drill for oil and gas.

Bill Stringer, BLM's Vernal field office manager, said the idea was to put all the information about non-wilderness areas with wilderness characteristics before the public.

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For the supplement, the BLM evaluated 34 areas and found that 25 areas comprising about 277,600 acres have the scenic beauty, cultural resources, wildlife and quiet recreational opportunities associated with wilderness.

The survey focused mostly on lands near the White River, the Lower Green River and areas near Dinosaur National Monument on the Utah-Colorado border, Stringer said.

Wilderness Society senior attorney Nada Culver complimented the report, saying it is remarkable for its scientific approach and detailed analyses. The numbers are so good, in fact, she is using them to show how much could be gained - especially for the mule deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, elk, moose and other wildlife in the region - with relatively small concessions from the oil and gas industry and off-highway recreationists.

The Vernal supplement is one of several signature BLM land plans for southern Utah due this fall that reflect the Bush administration's push to develop oil and natural gas resources on federal land. The Vernal field office, one of the busiest in the nation, has seen a steady climb in the number of drilling permits it has granted.

In 2000, the office approved 237 permits. This year it approved 1,015 permits and is on track to stamp 1,250 in 2008, officials said.

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Under the Vernal BLM's preferred alternative outlined in its 2005 draft plan, 983,000 acres would be open to oil, gas and coal-bed methane leasing, 65,000 more acres than leasable in 2005 - when the draft environmental impact statement was released.

That preferred alternative predicts about 6,342 wells would be drilled. Under the more restrictive supplemental alternative for the wilderness-quality lands - which are not the same as designated Wilderness Study Areas - about 6,117 wells would be drilled.

The BLM's preferred option would have a profound effect on wildlife by cutting up their habitat, which interferes with migration and breeding. The more restrictive supplemental alternative would keep hundreds of thousands of habitat acres intact, Culver said.

Monument Butte, Red Wash, Altamont-Bluebell and the East and West Tavaputs Plateau would benefit most, she noted.

"The message here to me is really clear," she said. "Not only are you protecting wilderness qualities, you are getting great wildlife benefits at relatively little cost to development."

The same phenomenon appears to hold for motorized recreation.

The preferred plan would allow 6,200 acres for open country off-highway vehicle use, compared to the more restrictive alternative's 5,400 acres. There also is only a small difference between OHV trail recommendations: 4,860 miles versus 4,650 miles. Again, the small difference yields huge gains for wildlife habitat, Culver said.

The report is open to public comment through Jan. 3.

----- Headline f=millierheadline-light q=l Public feedback sought

text The Vernal field office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management will accept public comment on its analysis of non-wilderness study areas with wilderness qualities through Jan. 3.

Both the supplement and the 2005 Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement are available electronically at www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/vernal/planning.html.

This Web site provides an electronic comment form for comment, which may also be submitted electronically at UT_VN_RMP_Supplement@blm.gov. Written comments should be sent to:

Bureau of Land Management Vernal Field Office RMP Comments Attention: Kelly Buckner 170 South 500 East Vernal, UT 84078

For more information, contact the Vernal Field Office, Bureau of Land Management at 435-781-4445.

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