



5. OIL AND GAS: BLM challenged over plan to drill 3,200 wells atop Roan Plateau (08/27/2009)

Eryn Gable, special to E&E

A Denver-based energy company could drill as many as 3,200 wells atop western Colorado's Roan Plateau, more than 15 times the number of wells the federal government used in its evaluation of the environmental impacts of drilling there, according to documents filed in court last week by environmental groups.

Attorneys for Earthjustice and Western Resource Advocates, representing the Colorado Environmental Coalition and other groups that are challenging the Bureau of Land Management's plan to allow drilling on the Roan Plateau, highlighted the company's plans as evidence that BLM violated federal environmental laws by failing to evaluate the full impacts of development on top of the plateau.

Bill Barrett Corp. made its development projections at an energy industry conference held earlier this month in Denver and in a prospectus filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission in June, according to Friday's court filing. A spokesman for the company declined comment on the environmentalists' claims, citing the pending litigation.

Barrett's plans for the plateau are significant because it has purchased a 90 percent stake in the leases on the top of the plateau, which were acquired last year by Vantage Energy for more than \$57 million as part of a federal lease sale.

"BBC's figure confirms the predictions in BLM's own analysis and computer modeling that thousands of wells are likely to be drilled atop the Plateau," the environmental groups' filing states.

Environmentalists contend that BLM's analysis is incomplete because it evaluated the impacts of 210 wells atop the plateau, which represent only a fraction of the wells expected to be drilled there.

"Under [BLM's] plan, it's conceivable that thousands of wells could be drilled on top of the plateau, and that level of drilling could dramatically change and dramatically damage the wildlife habitat and wilderness-quality lands up there," said Earthjustice attorney Michael Freeman. "That level of drilling is just going to turn the Roan into an industrial zone."

Environmentalists say much of the 73,000-acre plateau, which rises 3,500 feet above the Colorado River Valley and includes cliffs, badlands and one of the state's largest waterfalls, qualifies as wilderness.

But the area also contains a rich natural gas field estimated to hold 9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, enough to power 4 million homes for the next 20 years.

Hundreds of wells already dot the base of the plateau, and environmentalists for years have been working to preserve the top of the plateau, arguing that development there could decimate one of the nation's purest strains of cutthroat trout and interfere with elk migration. Drilling opponents have also suggested that the plateau contains far less natural gas than BLM has estimated, citing their own analysis showing approximately 400 billion cubic feet of gas in the area.

Under the final environmental impact statement released in 2006, BLM decided to limit activity on top of the Roan Plateau so that no more than 1 percent of federal lands, or about 350 acres, would be disturbed at any one time. Additionally, the agency ordered companies to use modern directional drilling techniques to protect sensitive fish and wildlife habitat.

Attempts to settle the lawsuit challenging BLM's decision have been ongoing, but Freeman said discussions with Barrett officials had reached an impasse, prompting the latest filing.



Colorado's scenic Roan Plateau could host as many as 3,200 oil and gas wells under a plan announced recently by Bill Barrett Corp. Environmental groups are challenging the Bureau of Land Management's environmental analysis of drilling activities in the region. Photo courtesy of Interior Department.

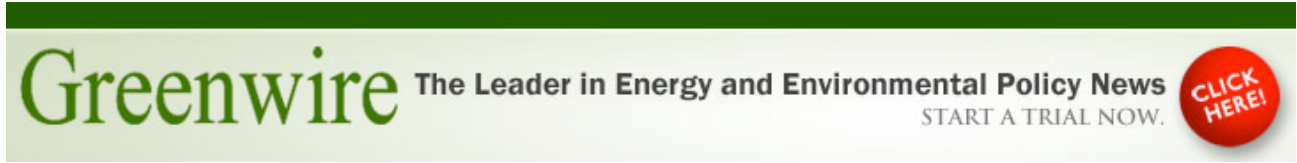
[Click here](#) to read the plaintiff's notice outlining Bill Barrett Corp.'s development plans.


[Click here](#) to read Bill Barrett's presentation at the June energy industry conference.

[Click here](#) to read the company's filing with the SEC.

Gable is an independent energy and environmental writer in Woodland Park, Colo.

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