

Ritter, Salazar tour Roan, ask for more time

By BOBBY MAGILL The Daily Sentinel

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RIFLE — Inspired by the wild land and energy development he saw Tuesday morning during a helicopter tour of the Roan Plateau and other parts of northwest Colorado, Gov. Bill Ritter once again asked for more time to review the Bureau of Land Management's plan that allows drilling on the Roan Plateau.

The trip marked Ritter's first trip to the plateau and a chance for him to see the extent to which energy development may one day spread across the region.

Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., who accompanied Ritter on the flight, said he will ask Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to grant Ritter's request that the BLM give him 120 days to review the Roan Plateau plan before leasing begins there.

The BLM last month officially opened the Roan to leasing and rejected Ritter's plea for more time to review the plan, which was developed with the help of former Gov. Bill Owens' administration.

The extra 120 days will give the Ritter administration time to try to clarify unanswered questions about how the plateau will be developed, including how natural gas drilling will be phased in on parts of the plateau, Salazar said.

Salazar put a hold last week on the nomination of James Caswell as the new BLM director until Kempthorne grants Ritter's request.

Ritter dismissed an idea from Rep. Al White, R-Winter Park, that would put half of the federal mineral lease revenues earned from leasing the plateau into a trust fund for colleges and universities.

Mineral lease revenues from the Roan Plateau would cover higher education costs in Colorado for one year, Ritter said, adding that paying for colleges and universities based on a volatile natural gas market is unwise.

"That's not the way to fund a legitimate public function," Ritter said.

Ultimately, Salazar said, land managers must take a long-range view of the regional impacts of energy development.

"We need to have a 25-year vision of what's going to be good for Colorado," Salazar said, adding he does not want to see any drilling on the Roan Plateau.

With the possibility of tens of thousands of new natural gas wells being drilled in northwest Colorado in the coming decades, “What is it that we want the western part of Colorado to look like?” Salazar said.

State Sen. Josh Penry, R-Fruita, criticized Ritter and Salazar’s news conference following the flight.

“We’ve had enough press conferences and media availability,” Penry said. “At some point they need to put forward an alternative approach. The politicizing (of the Roan Plateau) is on the verge of being overdone.”

Penry also said Ritter would be wise to include Colorado Department of Transportation chief Russell George in on his discussions about how to prevent the plateau from being drilled. George, of Rifle, helped forge the Roan Plateau plan as Department of Natural Resources Director in the Owens administration.

Environmentalists are convinced they can win protections for the Roan Plateau because they’re confident Democratic leaders in the Colorado Legislature and in Congress will continue to fight for them, said Clare Bastable of the Colorado Mountain Club.

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