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A Unique Space: Some Groups Seek to Preserve Otero Mesa

OTERO MESA - One of the quieter issues of last week's midterm election in New Mexico was about whether to open Otero Mesa - some 520,000 acres of public lands southwest of Carlsbad - to oil and gas exploration.

Democratic Gov.-elect Bill Richardson opposed such development of the area during debates and at his rallies.

During the election campaign, Republican gubernatorial candidate John Sanchez told voters in Alamogordo he would support oil and gas leasing in Otero Mesa because of heightened national security concerns.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and both candidates for the 2nd Congressional District, Steve Pearce and John Arthur Smith, also favored opening the wilderness area to oil and gas companies, citing the economic development needs of southeastern New Mexico.

Still, this last stretch of the Chihuahuan Desert, a 2-hour drive from Carlsbad, has defenders who believe the Bureau of Land Management should turn the grasslands of Otero Mesa into 19 wilderness areas instead of drilling it for energy resources.

Recently, Coalition for Otero Mesa members from Carlsbad, Las Cruces, El Paso and Albuquerque met at the grasslands to discuss ways to get their voices heard.

"This needs extraordinary measures," said Stephen Capra, media coordinator for the Albuquerque-based New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. "This place is in a difficult position, and it is going to be a multi-step process."

Capra urged Otero Mesa visitors to not only write to senators and representatives, but to make appointments with their staff to discuss the issue in person.

Steve West, a Carlsbad High School biology teacher and member of Carlsbad's Chihuahuan Desert Conservation Alliance, spoke to the group about the biological and ecological significance of Otero Mesa.

"When people think of all the unique spots, this place is just as rich as the Everglades," he said.

West said Otero Mesa's ecological makeup has changed over the years, quoting from U.S. Army Capt. John Pope's expedition diaries.

A Feb. 23, 1854, entry in Pope's diary about Otero Mesa reads, "The water is situated on the north face of (Alamo) mountain, about a half a mile from the road ... Indeed it cannot be mistaken, as there are a few cottonwood trees near the springs, and nowhere else in the vicinity."

"It's not to say that it hasn't already been altered, but if we've lost some of it, that doesn't

mean we shouldn't protect what we have," West said.

Grasslands across the nation are endangered, West said, and Otero Mesa is home to a diversity of plants and wildlife species.

West said Otero Mesa is also prime habitat for both endangered and sensitive bird species such as the bald eagle, golden eagle and the Aplomado falcon.

"Of all groups of birds, grasslands birds are declining the fastest," he said. "I've given a lot of tours in this area that were very depressing."

Development by the oil and gas industry - specifically roads, pipelines, power lines and toxic waste ponds - would disrupt the ecological balance, West said.

"People who want to drill here are motivated by greed," he said.

In its initial environmental impact statement, the BLM had three alternatives for Otero Mesa, each promoting oil and gas development.

"They didn't have a no-drilling option," West said. "But this is public land, and the people in the U.S. have as much right to say what they want with this as much as the BLM. People just need to say, No, we don't want this."

Alex Apostolides, an archaeologist from El Paso, said the two mountains in Otero Mesa - Alamo and Wind Mountain - also are home to ancient Native American petroglyphs that date back 5,000 years.

"This is not a thing of whether you'd like to preserve it. You have to preserve it," he said. "There are petroglyphs almost every step of the way along the foothills of the mountain."

Ron Eagan, another CHS biology teacher and coach, said although he is a Republican, he disagrees with most of the state's GOP politicians about Otero Mesa.

"There is no compelling reason to drill out here. This is not the last place in New Mexico to explore for gas and oil," he said. "It's a place worth saving and preserving like it is. It's unique."

As a hunter, Eagan said he believes in conservation of deer and birds.

"Even if I don't come out here to hunt, it's the idea that it's here if I want to," he said. "People who think there is nothing worth saving here obviously haven't been here and seen this."

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