



Governor supports protecting Otero Mesa

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New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson has released a letter giving his support to creating wilderness area in the greater Otero Mesa area of Otero County and surrounding areas.

The letter stresses that future development of the Otero Mesa area would have to include the designation of a significant wilderness area and require environmentally compatible energy practices.

"I will remain opposed to any drilling in this area unless the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducts a new wilderness study on the 1.8 million acres that constitute the Greater Otero Mesa Area," Richardson said in his letter addressed to Gale Norton, Secretary of the Department of the Interior in Washington D.C.

Richardson asks that BLM delay issuing the Final Environmental Impact Statement so his staff can become part of the process.

"Otero Mesa is reportedly the largest contiguous piece of Chihuahuan desert grassland left in North America and is significant for its wildlife and wilderness, and its characteristics as a biological reserve," Richardson said in his letter. "Care must be taken before opening this large landscape to drilling, or we will risk destroying the unique character of this biologically rich area and fragile ecosystem."

The New Mexico Wilderness alliance has released a report by grassland specialist Dr. Walter Whitford. The report, Ecological Characteristics of Otero Mesa and Impacts of Gas Development, outlines the effects oil and gas development could have on the natural setting.

Whitford's report concludes with evidence that black grama grasslands are unlikely to be restored given the nature of black grama grass and the damage well pads, road cuts and pipeline corridors do to the environment.

"The problem soils, commercial sources of seeds, and the potential genetic problems with reseeded range lands combine to make the risk of inability to restore the Chihuahuan Desert grasslands of Otero Mesa extremely high," Whitford said in the report.

"We hope the Bush Administration will respect the people of New Mexico by honoring their Governor's desires for our state," said New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Executive Director Jim Scarantino. "Certainly New Mexico deserves a place at the table in this discussion."