

## Small Potatoes, Fresh Water and Otero Mesa

by Nathan Newcomer, NM Wilderness Alliance

The air was cool; the soil wet, and the desert alive with radiant flowers, billowing clouds and an inescapable breath of peaceful solitude. Yucca forests, scattered and dense, waving pink and white brushes atop prickly heads, stood mightily on the desert floor like an army of unwavering defenders. In the distance, the volcanic Cornudas Mountains sparked on the horizons silhouette and invited curiosity to search their rugged flanks and to discover untold stories from generations long past. A sea of grass, two to three feet high, rolled with the gusts of wind that blew inexplicably across this Chihuahuan Desert; this 1.2 million-acre stretch of wild country; this place called Otero Mesa.

New Mexico's Otero Mesa is considered America's largest and wildest grassland remaining on public lands; public lands that belong to every American citizen. Home to over 1,000 native wildlife species, including black-tailed prairie dogs, desert mule deer, mountain lions, golden and bald eagles, over 250 species of migratory songbirds, the endangered Aplomado falcon, and a stronghold for the states healthiest herd of pronghorn antelope, Otero Mesa represents wild New

Mexico at its best. Thousands of ancient archaeological sites rest throughout this wild landscape, many of which that have yet to be documented, giving testimony to early inhabitation as far back as 2,000 years. Additionally, a citizen inventory completed in 2003 found that over 500,000 acres of this wild desert grassland qualify for Wilderness designation.

Underneath the vast expanse of the rolling grassland wilderness of Otero Mesa sits a large, untapped, fresh water aquifer. This aquifer, referred to as the Salt Basin, is considered to be the largest fresh water aquifer remaining in New Mexico, and was recently the subject of a study done by Sandia National Labs. The study showed that there is three times as much water as previously thought and according to Sandia National Laboratories hydrologist David Chace "there is unequivocally lots of water." [Alb. Journal: April 23, 2005, New Study Shows Salt Basin Aquifer Is Larger Than Estimated]. In the arid southwest, there is no more precious resource than water to ensure the long-term sustainability of our quality of life.

Yet, in spite of the outstanding wilderness characteristics of Otero Mesa or the vast res-

ervoir of fresh water lying just beneath the grassland surface, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is working hard to open this wild landscape and its fresh water aquifer to full-scale oil and gas development.

Today, the debate over drilling in Otero Mesa has reached a point where local authorities and the citizens of the State have made clear that we want to see this natural treasure and its fresh water aquifer protected. Yet, leaders in Washington, D.C., and the local BLM, led by Director Linda Rundell, have consistently ignored these wishes and continued to charge ahead with an unbalanced plan that would irrevocably decimate this desert grassland and its fresh water resources.

The BLM claims time and again that they can drill in an "environmentally sound manner;" that their plan is the "most restrictive ever developed," and that "environmentalists" are feeding the public "misinformation." These claims are inconsistent with the facts and lead to reckless policies that are completely out-of-touch with New Mexico's quality of life.

Out of the more than one million acres that comprise Otero Mesa, the BLM plan opens 95 percent to oil and gas leasing and drilling.

Only 5 percent of the area would be closed to development, of which half must legally be closed. The BLM constantly speaks about balance in its plan, but the only balance they offer is to the oil and gas industry, at the expense of our fresh water and wild public lands.

In 2001, the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD) found that out of 734 cases of soil and groundwater contamination, oil and gas operations were responsible for 444, almost 60 percent. Furthermore, the Oil Conservation Division (OCD) recently published a report, which shows a staggering 1400 additional cases of groundwater contamination due to oil and gas operations. The BLM boasts that modern drilling practices are environmentally sound, but the water contamination cases contradict their statements.

Other irresponsible aspects of the BLM's plan include: 1) Relying on an unproven eye-in-the-sky pilot program to monitor Otero Mesa drilling from outer space; 2) Not having the manpower on the ground to enforce



regulations; 3) Not considering geophysical/seismic activities "surface disturbing" even though such activities use heavy machinery and dynamite blasting, and 4) Having no clear definition for restoration and using non-native Otero Mesa species to reclaim disturbed areas. The only misinformation being fed to the public is by Director Rundell and the BLM.

The oil industry has said the fossil fuels under Otero Mesa are not expected to be "prolific." Likewise, Director Rundell calls the resources of Otero Mesa "small potatoes." If the resource is not "prolific" or is "small potatoes," why are we having this debate? To answer this question we must travel back to when the Bush administration first entered office, and before the BLM issued its final plan for Otero Mesa.

In May of 2001, the Cheney Energy Task Force concocted a report that recommended the expansion of drilling on public lands in the West. Accompanying the Cheney report were two executive orders, which directed all federal agencies, including the BLM, to "expedite energy-related projects [...] and accelerate the completion of energy related projects."

Consequently, the local BLM scrapped their draft plan and proceeded to charge full steam ahead with a new, irresponsible plan, which ignores the potential degradation of environmental, recreational, and cultural values in Otero Mesa.

When all of the pieces to this disturbing puzzle come together, the clear picture that emerges is one of recklessness, deception, and a flagrant lack of concern for the people of New Mexico and our quality of life.

Otero Mesa's wild grasslands and fresh water aquifer mean far more to the citizens of the Land of Enchantment than a few small potatoes worth of oil and gas.



**PUBLIC NOTICE  
OF  
AN APPLICATION FOR AN ORDER  
AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF DEBT  
BY NAVOPACHE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.**

Navopache Electric Cooperative, Inc. (Applicant) has filed an Application with the Arizona Corporation Commission (Commission) for an order authorizing Applicant to issue \$33,231,000.00 in debt to finance the construction and operation of electric facilities (Docket No. E-01787A-05-0719). The application is available for inspection during regular business hours at the office of the Commission in Phoenix, Arizona, and the Applicant's offices in Lakeside, Arizona.

Intervention in the Commission's proceedings on the application shall be permitted to any person entitled by law to intervene and having a direct substantial interest in this matter. Persons desiring to intervene must file a motion to intervene and thirteen copies with the Commission's Docket Control at 1200 West Washington, Phoenix, Arizona and serve a copy upon the Applicant c/o Michael A. Curtis, Curtis, Goodwin, Sullivan, Udall & Schwab, P.L.C., 2712 North 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85006. At a minimum, a motion to intervene shall contain the following information:

1. The name, address and telephone number of the proposed intervenor and of any person upon whom service of documents is to be made if different than the intervenor.
2. A short statement of the proposed intervenor's interest in the proceeding.
3. Whether the proposed intervenor desires a formal evidentiary hearing on the application and the reasons for such a hearing.
4. A statement certifying that a copy of the motion to intervene has been mailed to Applicant.

The granting of motions to intervene shall be governed by A.A.C. R14-3-105, except that all motions to intervene must be filed on, or before, the 15<sup>th</sup> day after the date this notice is published.

**This Newspaper's Editorial and  
"Letter to the Editor" Policy**

If a "Letter to the Editor" or Editorial is to appear in this newspaper, it needs to educate the public on a topic or at least express your point of view in a rational and calm manner. We are trying to bring the community together, not participate in tearing it apart. We believe this is the best road to take in a small community... making sure the public is aware of differing viewpoints, problems, solutions, etc... but always doing this in a civil and constructive manner. Priority status will be given to letters that offer a solution, or alternate path in which to approach a problem... as opposed to just saying something is wrong.

Everyone has a different point of view. We feel it is important to provide a place for these viewpoints to be expressed. This newspaper will not deny anyone the opportunity to express themselves... again, in a civil and constructive manner.

Letters to the Editor or Editorials can be sent to us using the contact information on the second page. They must be received by the 20th of the month, be signed, and provide the writer's contact information.

Having said all that, in our newspaper on the second page is the following disclaimer... "We reserve the right to refuse any story, article, letter, or ad that we feel is contrary to the mission of this publication... for any reason."