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## Editorials

### Ignoring interests to push a big oil agenda

*By former BLM Resource Advisory Council Members Chuck Pergler, Barbara Johnson, Bill Buss, Steve West Sanford Schemnitz, and Phyllenore Howard*




Within the next few weeks the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will decide the fate of the 1.2 million acre grassland New Mexicans affectionately call Otero Mesa. As past members of the BLM Resource Advisory Council (RAC), a citizen's advisory panel set up by the agency to help put a local voice on BLM issues since 1993, we feel it is important to set the record straight. As the BLM prepares to release its final decision on Otero Mesa, one thing is abundantly clear; the BLM has ignored the wishes of New Mexicans. They have allowed special interests and the Bush Administration's unyielding pro-development policies to control the process, thus potentially opening this wild and important grassland to full-scale oil and gas development in the very near future.

Perhaps the most ironic aspect to this debate is the Bush Administration's continuing insistence that they want more local control over our nation's public lands. In the case of Otero Mesa, we have clearly been witness to a process that allowed local input only until that input began to loudly express a desire to see the area protected. Then the process was quickly removed from New Mexico and dictated directly from Washington, where the directive was to expedite oil and gas development. From the perspective of those of us who have worked and believe in the mission of the BLM RAC this has been both sobering and contrary to the creation of our citizens' advisory role.

In the early stages of the debate over Otero Mesa, the BLM RAC tried to bring the parties together in hopes a compromise could be reached. In hindsight, the attempt was not balanced; it favored industry and the Administration, and offered little to sportsmen, Native Americans or conservationists. Thus it ultimately failed.

The BLM RAC is made up of a cross-section of people who utilize our public lands. Some of our members include ranchers, representatives of the oil and gas industry, sportsmen, tribes and members of the conservation community. The BLM RAC was designed to work on local issues such as grazing, logging, conservation, oil and gas leasing and management. Meeting four times a year in different parts of the state, our job has been to listen to local constituents and advise the Agency in making management plans or key decisions affecting its 12.8 million acres in New Mexico. Over the past three years we have listened to countless testimony concerning Otero Mesa, from industry and conservationists alike. We have taken field trips to drill sites and explored some of the wildest parts of this unique part of our state.



In the end, we have come to the conclusion that this area cannot be drilled in an environmentally sound manner. In fact, drilling this area according to many in the BLM will likely result in very little oil or gas, but will have serious long-term impacts on this wild and important part of our state. So much of southern New Mexico is already open to oil and gas development. One must ask, is it really in our

state's best interest to see this area, that is so important to local ranchers, Native Americans, sportsmen, conservationists and future generations of New Mexicans, destroyed so a few oil and gas companies can profit?

Working on the RAC has shown us time and time again that industry promises rarely equate to reality on the ground. By contrast, many of the people we have met who work for the BLM here in New Mexico are good and dedicated people, trying to do the right thing. But in the case of Otero Mesa, the process has simply been taken out of their hands.

Governor Bill Richardson has said that he supports protecting large parts of Otero Mesa and continues to speak with the Interior Secretary Gail Norton and others in the Bush Administration to make sure the voice of New Mexicans are heard. But the most important voice in this debate will ultimately be that of Senator Pete Domenici. The Senator, over the years, has worked to protect important parts of New Mexico and on this issue should step in and find a compromise that would protect large parts of this incredible grassland as a National Conservation Area, while allowing drilling on select parts with very strict and enforceable regulations. In other words, creating a real model that allows industry to profit, while seriously trying to safeguard our environment.

Working on the BLM RAC has been a rewarding and often frustrating experience. It is never easy to find common ground on the variety of complex and emotional issues we have dealt with. But in the end, New Mexico is our home and for us that means erring on the side that ensures that we maintain our quality of life, health and a sense that our local voice has meaning. Otero Mesa is special; it's something worth fighting for.