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Drilling Plan OK'd for Rare Desert Land

Despite opposition by New Mexico's governor, the Bush administration approves expansion of oil and gas exploration in Otero Mesa grassland.

By Julie Cart, Times Staff Writer

Overriding objections by New Mexico's governor, the Interior Department announced a final plan Monday for expanding oil and gas drilling on Otero Mesa, a rare desert grassland and one of a handful of places in the western U.S. where opposition to drilling had united ranchers, property rights advocates, hunters and conservationists.

The plan, crafted by the Bureau of Land Management, is smaller in scope than originally contemplated, but much larger than what Gov. Bill Richardson indicated he would support. It allows drilling a maximum of 141 exploratory wells and 84 producing wells on nearly 2 million acres of Chihuahuan grassland in southern New Mexico.

The decision sets aside 36,000 acres as habitat for the endangered Aplomado falcon and forbids leasing in wilderness study areas and other designated protected areas. In total, the plan prohibits drilling on 124,000 acres.

Richardson, a Democrat who was secretary of Energy in the Clinton administration, proposed a compromise last March that allowed some drilling but would have placed more than 75% of the federal land off-limits to energy exploration.

On Monday, Richardson lashed out at the Bush administration's "one-way, oil-only energy policy."

"I am very disappointed by the Bush administration's failure to respect New Mexico's position on oil and gas leasing in this precious, sensitive and world-renowned area," Richardson said in a statement.

"The Interior Department is ignoring its stated policies of respecting and working with states regarding major land management decisions."

New Mexico's attorney general, Patricia A. Madrid, said the state would appeal the decision.

"We need to ensure that the state's voice is heard by national policymakers," she said.

More than 85% of public comments regarding Otero Mesa favored no drilling.

Efforts to forestall drilling on Otero Mesa were led by a diverse coalition of New Mexicans concerned about groundwater, wildlife and the preservation of grazing land.

The rugged and rocky desert west of Carlsbad is home to herds of pronghorn antelope, migratory songbirds and countless Indian petroglyphs.

One of the most contested issues is water — both the quantity used for oil and gas production and the quality of water after it is used.

Energy companies pump large amounts of groundwater while operating wells, and the used water is sometimes contaminated with saline or petroleum byproducts.

A study commissioned by the state found that Otero Mesa was the largest source of untapped groundwater in New Mexico.

"There is really nothing in the plan that speaks to the issue of groundwater," said Stephen Capra of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. Capra said there were no limits on the amount of water that energy companies could pump.

"The bottom line continues to be we are talking about destroying the largest remaining desert grasslands in America for at best a few days worth of oil and gas. That is shortsighted," Capra said.

BLM officials called the plan innovative and environmentally sensitive, noting a requirement that companies restore disturbed areas around drill pads before moving on to new sites.

Moreover, BLM officials said that if the damage caused by drilling could not be repaired, no further drilling would be allowed in the area.

"We're trying to listen, we're trying to do the right thing; we have an obligation to manage the energy resource for the good of the country," said Ed Roberson, manager of the BLM field office in Las Cruces, N.M. Roberson said leasing could begin by the end of the year.

The potential energy yield from the area is unclear.

According to the BLM, about 100 wells have been drilled in the last century and two have produced oil or gas. The state BLM office rates Otero Mesa's production potential as low to moderate.