

Drilling on Otero Mesa could jeopardize water

BY NATE COTE FOR THE DAILY NEWS

Jun 2, 2006, 04:30 pm

A local state representative is advocating drilling for natural gas on the Otero Mesa. His proposal is reflective of a very limited understanding of the nation's energy predicament and the competing interests concerning the Otero Mesa.

Worse, his plan puts at risk the largest untapped freshwater aquifer in the state of New Mexico.

The greater Otero Mesa area encompasses over 1.2 million acres, and it is the largest and wildest Chihuahuan Desert grassland remaining on public lands. In addition to its natural beauty, the Otero Mesa sits above enough fresh water to supply a million people for 100 years.

Such a proposal could be said to be blinded by ideology and special interests; such drilling would pose dangers to this very valuable water supply.

Groundwater contamination is a common byproduct of oil and gas operations; approximately 1,800 cases have been identified in this state by the New Mexico Minerals and Natural Resources Department and the Oil Conservation Division.

The Otero Mesa is not the long-term solution to our energy future -- the gas reserves are small, and will be expensive to extract.

Alternative, renewable energy sources like wind and solar -- plentiful in the state of New Mexico -- are a much better answer. Renewable energy sources also have an environmental impact to consider, but they will create more jobs than gas drilling, and without the danger of irreversible destruction of a valuable water source and natural grassland.

Again, the problem is one of long-term vision. Can anyone really be so naive as to think that gas prices will go down because we drill on the Otero Mesa?

Water scarcity is a continuing problem in New Mexico, and those elected for multiple terms in the state Legislature have yet to find a solution.

The same local representative proposing drilling for gas also sponsored a \$300 million water distribution system from the Salt Basin, and now he is proposing oil and natural gas drilling that could pollute that source and render the water unusable.

We, the taxpayers, deserve a secure and viable investment for the \$300 million, not a gamble that gas drilling may not pollute this very water source. We need to wisely spend tax revenue, not foolishly throw it away.

Other interests on the Otero Mesa are the fragile ecological system, and the Mesa's recreational and hunting uses. Hunting is a major industry in New Mexico in its own right.

We need to consider the pronghorn antelope and the endangered aplomado falcon when analyzing the overall impact of gas drilling.

To drill for gas, we must consider the impact of the roads that will be needed in addition to the increased traffic that will result.

As you can see, it is not a simple solution, and deciding to drill may not be the "pot of gold," but in spite of this the Bureau of Land Management's state director calls it "small potatoes" and the

Bush administration's own geologists view it as "limited foreseeable development."
The key question is how we best prepare for our children's future, and the answer lies in pursuing alternatives to the endangerment of our water supply and an irreplaceable natural resource.

Nate Cote is the Democratic candidate for the state Legislature for District 53, and will face Terry Marquardt in the November election. Cote currently lives near Organ, and works as an instructor at Doña Ana Branch Community College and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University at Holloman Air Force Base.