

Otero Mesa battle continues

Editorial from the Las Cruces Times

February 7, 2005

The Bureau of Land Management issued its "final" decision on the regulation or restriction of oil and gas drilling on Otero Mesa on Jan. 24 and the response was immediate, expected and as has been reported many times before — No.

Opinion is so polarized and so immovable on the parts of those who have thrust themselves into this controversy that we believe it's a "throw-away" subject. We doubt this will change a single mind about oil and gas development or non-development on the Otero Mesa, but will cultivate a blizzard of angry letters to the editor and calls to Sound Off! saying what has already been said a dozen or more times.

It's not that the subject is unimportant, because it is of great importance to New Mexico and perhaps the country. It's that it has been kicking around for so long that it has become tiresome.

Opposition to the BLM proposals are part of a national campaign by a coalition of well-organized and apparently now well-funded environmental groups that want no development, or only for those activities they approve. We assume they all know where Otero Mesa is and what it looks like. It is beautiful grassland. It is not national park material.

The BLM claims it has answered their concerns and revised the proposal. The opponents say not enough. Enough, however, translates into no trespassing by the oil boys. That does not fulfill the BLM mission of managing public lands in the best interests of all the people.

What is new is that Gov. Bill Richardson has stopped mumbling and said he will fight the new proposal with everything he has, and this is seconded by Attorney General Patricia Madrid. This governor is waxing popular on the spending of greatly increased revenue from oil and gas interests in other parts of the state this very day.

Oil and gas industry spokespeople are reiterating that if this all gets too expensive, interest will wane. Interest became high after Heyco drilled two wells and said they showed promise. Leasing was stopped, but not before some were issued, and those are good for drilling today.

But since it costs about \$1 million to punch a hole in the earth's surface, there is no rush to drill. There is no infrastructure in place. Industry spokesmen say continued delays and demands could render further exploration unfeasible.

The BLM's controversial proposal is to allow drilling on one-tenth of 1 percent on the southern part of what is the 2 million-acre Otero Mesa. The report is more than three inches thick of restrictions on what can be done. It is very restrictive. For those who wonder where Otero Mesa is, its strategic location gas sites are in an area just north of the Permian Basin in Texas.

Various levels of activity would be allowed in other parts of the mesa.

Where will it end? As was said in the very beginning, "See you in Court." This is yet to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and court costs. The opponents of development said from the beginning that this was the destination. Since BLM is a government agency, who pays? Taxpayers will undoubtedly foot the bill for both sides of a difference of opinion.

Feb 7, 2005, 10:12 pm