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## Richardson To Protect Otero Mesa

By Tania Soussan

*Journal Staff Writer*

Gov. Bill Richardson pledged Saturday that the state will do all it can to protect Otero Mesa from oil and gas development, including protesting a federal plan for the area and making life tougher for drillers.

"The federal government just got a notice that if they want to drill in Otero Mesa, this governor and this state are going to fight them," Richardson told a cheering crowd of more than 600 people at the KiMo Theatre in Downtown Albuquerque.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management earlier this month released its plan to allow expanded oil and gas drilling on Otero Mesa in southern New Mexico.

Conservationists and others believe the plan does not do enough to protect the area's fragile Chihuahuan Desert ecosystem. Oil and gas drillers say the plan presents too many barriers to exploration and development.

Richardson signed an executive order Saturday that directs state agencies to protest the federal plan, work on an alternative plan to be submitted to the BLM next month and toughen regulations for oil and gas drillers.

Senate President Pro Tem Richard Romero, D-Albuquerque, stood with Richardson as he signed the order.

"These aren't the last steps you'll see us take, but this is going to be a tough fight regardless," Richardson said.

BLM officials and Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, were not immediately available for comment Saturday afternoon.

### Symbol in a debate

Independent Petroleum Association of New Mexico spokesman Mark Mathis criticized Richardson's actions.

"Our country is facing a natural gas crisis, and the oil and gas industry is being denied access to these critically important resources because some folks want to play Chicken Little," he said, adding that drilling has only minimal impact and does not damage the environment.

Richardson spoke at a public forum organized by the Coalition for Otero Mesa and the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance to send a message to

Washington, D.C., about public wishes to protect Otero Mesa.

Hundreds of people from El Paso, Albuquerque, Carlsbad, Silver City, Taos and other New Mexico communities joined in the rally.

The fight over Otero Mesa has attracted national attention as the area—about 1.2 million acres between Carlsbad and El Paso—has become a symbol of the national debate over oil and gas drilling versus environmental protection on public lands.

Richardson said his executive order—in "language the Department of Interior and the Bush administration cannot misunderstand or confuse"—makes it state policy to protect and conserve the resources of Otero Mesa and prevent oil and gas development there.

He also directed the state engineer to use very strict criteria when considering water-well permit applications from oil and gas drillers on Otero Mesa. He told the state Forestry Division and Game and Fish Department to implement special protections for plants and animals on Otero Mesa. And he directed the Oil Conservation Division to put a moratorium on oil and gas pits there until it develops new rules to regulate them.

The ban on pits means oil and gas companies would have to use a more expensive, closed system of trucks or tanks to hold water needed for drilling or water produced in the drilling process.

## **A policy to protect**

Richardson has until March 8 to make sure the BLM plan is consistent with state policies. His report to the agency will be "hard-hitting" and will include a state-written alternative plan to managing the Otero Mesa area, said Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Cabinet Secretary Joanna Prukop.

That plan has not yet been written but likely will favor environmentally sensitive drilling in some parts of the BLM planning area and will suggest putting as much as 500,000 acres of Chihuahuan Desert and grasslands off-limits, Prukop said.

The BLM plan puts 105,000 acres off-limits, she said.

Ned Farquhar, the governor's adviser on energy, environment and natural resources, said the state could sue the BLM if its other efforts are unsuccessful.

Saturday's rally also included a chance for public comment. Speaking against development of the mesa were writers Jimmy Santiago Baca and Bill deBuys, Aztec rancher Tweeti Blancett and former Gov. Dave Cargo.

Trisha London of Silver City encouraged the crowd to get involved.

"Giving carte blanche to oil companies on our last unique places like Otero Mesa is like economic and environmental suicide," she said. "These places are the heart and soul of New Mexico. How much will you like New Mexico if it

starts to look like Texas?"