

Debating the Future of Otero Mesa: Morality vs. Greed

Nathan Newcomer, Media Coordinator
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

Opinion for the *Roswell Daily Record*, August 2005

Would you be willing to subject your fresh drinking water supply to the possibility of contamination? Would you like to see Carlsbad Caverns, or White Sands National Monument, two of New Mexico's crown jewels and two of the world's most unique areas, overrun with oil and gas development? Or how about telling the tourism industry that we didn't need their money and that they should go spend it somewhere else? Any reasonable person would answer no to all three of these questions, but this is exactly what is occurring when we consider allowing full-scale oil and gas development in New Mexico's Otero Mesa.

For starters, many prominent people, excluding Harvey E. Yates Company (HEYCO), one of the oil and gas companies that wants to drill in Otero Mesa, believe that there is very little oil or gas underneath this delicate desert grassland. The New Mexico Bureau of Land Management (BLM) state director, Linda Rundell, refers to the energy potential under Otero as "small potatoes." Estimates contained in various oil and gas related publications suggest that the amount is not great either – probably only enough to last a few days.

Secondly, Otero Mesa is the largest and wildest Chihuahuan Desert grassland left on public lands in the United States. That is a pretty big deal, especially when we talk about New Mexico's tourism industry and more specifically our outdoor tourism industry. According to the State Tourism Department, in 2003, outdoor tourism brought over 4.5 million visitors who contributed almost half-a-billion dollars to the state's economy. That is a lot of money being spent on New Mexico's outdoors and most of us would like to see that amount increase.

Finally, and perhaps the greatest fact concerning Otero Mesa is that it holds the largest, untapped, fresh-water aquifer remaining in New Mexico. This aquifer, referred to as the Salt Basin, was recently the subject of a study done by Sandia Labs. The study showed that there is three times as much water as previously thought and according to Sandia National Laboratories hydrologist David Chace "there is unequivocally lots of water"[Alb. Journal: April 23, 2005, New Study Shows Salt Basin Aquifer Is Larger Than Estimated]. Other estimates indicate that there could be 15 million acre-feet of potable drinking water, or enough fresh water to supply a community of 1 million New Mexicans for 100 years! Common sense tells us that in an arid state such as ours, there is no more precious resource than water.

Common sense also tells us that there is no need to drill for minuscule amounts of oil and gas in an area that can provide greater economic benefits through recreation, potable water, and ranching, which unlike gas drilling, will last well into the future.

Furthermore, with over 75,000 oil and gas wells having already been drilled in southeastern New Mexico alone, and more than 85% of the West's public lands already open to oil and gas development, it seems apparent that the only reason we're contemplating even drilling in Otero Mesa is so that one company can gain more profits. No one is arguing profits are bad, in fact they are essential to sustaining a vibrant economy and respectable way of life. Yet when profits become the only focus of any

endeavor, no matter what the consequences to our environment, future water supplies, and quality of life, those who stand to reap the benefits of that exploitation are simply self-serving and negligent

The debate over Otero Mesa is not one about drilling our way to energy independence or one of an economic argument. It is a debate of morality.

How can we morally allow one of the most unique areas in the world to be overrun with oil and gas drilling? Would we let that happen to White Sands or Carlsbad Caverns? How can we place the state's largest, untapped, freshwater aquifer at risk, just for a few days or weeks of oil and gas, and be perfectly content with it? Moreover, how can we gamble with our children's future, by placing profits over long-term sustainability and a healthy quality of life? The simple answer is: we cannot and we must not.