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Oil-shale go-ahead decried

Sen. Salazar calls BLM's final environmental plan a "last-minute fire sale"

By Steve Lipsher

The federal Bureau of Land Management on Thursday issued a final environmental plan to open 2.4 million acres in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming to oil-shale and tar-sands development.

The 1,800-page environmental-impact statement immediately drew fire from officials in Colorado — where 360,000 target acres in BLM's "preferred" approach are located.

"With the Department of the Interior's action today, the federal government has once again failed to act as a responsible partner for Colorado," Gov. Bill Ritter said in a statement.

"The Bush administration is engaging in last-minute maneuvering in its waning days," Ritter said.

U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, a Denver Democrat, called the BLM move a "last-minute fire sale."

Local officials had pressed the BLM to delay any action until such questions as what technologies would be used to extract the oil and how much water and power would be needed are answered.

But BLM officials said that some of those questions can't be answered and that the agency needs to move ahead.

The BLM's goal, said agency director Jim Caswell, is to "promote economically viable and environmental sound production of oil shale."

There is enough oil — 9 billion barrels — to meet the U.S. demand for imported oil for 110 years, Caswell said.

The draft environmental-impact statement issued a year ago was the subject of public and government comments for months.

The scale of the project concerned many, including other federal agencies.

Getting at the oil will require more power — likely the construction of a 1,500- to 2,400-megawatt power plant — and about three barrels of water for every barrel of oil produced, according to the BLM plan.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service raised questions about the plan because the technologies to extract the oil are still experimental, making it difficult to know the real impact.

It did not appear those questions were answered, said Amy Atwood, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore.

"It looks what they did is remove the word 'draft' and replace it with the word 'final,'" Atwood said.

Despite Thursday's release of the final environmental-impact statement, extraction of oil shale won't happen anytime soon. The BLM is still blocked by congressional moratorium from issuing a plan to actually lease the land, and it could be years before the technology to actually extract the oil is perfected.

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