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Polis to BLM: Much to consider in next plan

- DENNIS WEBB

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A proposed Bureau of Land Management plan for its Uncompahgre Field Office needs to be considered in light of new state oil and gas and climate laws and ongoing state concerns about impacts to wildlife, Gov. Jared Polis said in a letter this week.

Polis provided the agency with what's called a governor's consistency review, aimed at analyzing the degree to which the plan does or doesn't jibe with state law, plans, programs and policies.

The BLM plan would guide public land use on BLM-managed lands and federal mineral estate in parts of Delta, Gunnison, Mesa, Montrose, Ouray and San Miguel counties.

The letter asks the BLM to consider Senate Bill 181, which overhauls how oil and gas is to be regulated in Colorado, and another measure setting goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the state.

Polis asks that as the state pursues reducing air pollutants and protecting the public and environment, oil and gas development on federal lands include practices such as compliance with state regulations and construction of adequate pipeline infrastructure before commercial production starts.

The state and BLM have extended until December a long-term agreement that applies both state and federal rules on federal oil and gas development in a coordinated fashion. But it's unclear to what degree the BLM will continue to incorporate state rules after that.

Reiterating concerns previously raised by the state Department of Natural Resources, Polis cites existing state plans and agreements pertaining to wildlife, some of which the BLM is a party to, as well as policies aimed at protecting big game winter range and migration corridors. He wrote that the BLM proposal's "failure to adopt commitments consistent with these State plans, policies, and agreements hinders Colorado's ability to meet its own goals and objectives for wildlife in the Planning Area."

Among the goals the state wants to see are limitations on the density of oil and gas surface facilities and roads where necessary to protect big game habitat.

Patrick Dooling, executive director of the Western Slope Conservation Center, said he appreciates the Polis letter.

"We hope the BLM will listen to the State of Colorado and our local communities and create a plan that better reflects our vision for a more sustainable future for our public lands," he said.

Activists had called for the plan to include more limits on oil and gas development, particularly when it comes to the amount of land available for leasing in the North Fork Valley.

Diana Dascalu-Joffe, a Denver-based attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, thinks that the letter from Polis comes up short.

She said in a statement, "It's disappointing that the governor appears to endorse Trump's plan to increase fossil-fuel production on public lands in Colorado. BLM's drill-anywhere plan is deeply incompatible with the governor's own clean energy goals for the state, so he's missed an opportunity to push back against this disastrous plan. The one bright spot is that the governor recognizes that this plan fails miserably to protect habitat for rapidly vanishing Gunnison sage grouse and mule deer herds."

Eric Carlson, executive director of the West Slope Colorado Oil and Gas Association, said the BLM's process under the National Environmental Policy Act "provides a thorough review of all needs including working with state and local governments. It would be a welcome outcome to have Colorado provide a clear picture of what is expected from the SB 181 and the implication for federal lands."

BLM spokespersons did not immediately respond Tuesday to emails for comment about the letter from Polis. The agency previously has said its proposed plan "responds to local community needs while aligning with the (Trump) administration's priorities like public lands access, sustainable energy development, economic growth and conservation stewardship."