

Trump's New Plan for Colorado Public Lands Could Triple Climate Pollution

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As federal officials finalize a plan that will guide the next several decades of public-lands policy across eastern Colorado, climate activists are sounding the alarm over its proposed increases in oil and gas drilling — which could triple the amount of greenhouse gas pollution originating from the region's federally owned lands.

“The Trump administration is completely undermining Colorado's efforts to cut climate pollution,” Taylor McKinnon, a public-lands campaigner for the **Center for Biological Diversity**, said in a statement. “This plan defies Governor Polis and state lawmakers, who have called for urgent action to scale back climate pollution. And it jeopardizes Colorado communities, wildlife and water.”

On Friday, June 21, the Bureau of Land Management **released** a draft resource management plan (RMP) outlining the agency's long-term vision for administering public lands in eastern Colorado. The plan's “decision area” covers more than 658,000 acres of BLM land and 3.3 million acres of federally owned mineral rights in the eastern half of the state.

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The Eastern Colorado RMP, which has been in development since 2015, would encompass an area previously covered by two different plans, the Northeast RMP and the Royal Gorge Resource Area RMP. The new plan will guide federal policy for administering BLM land and mineral estates scattered across the state, particularly in rural mountain areas in Park, Fremont and Huerfano counties — and it reaffirms the agency's commitment to “facilitating energy, mineral, and oil and gas development and production in accordance with existing national policy and laws.”

For years, environmental activists have pressed federal officials to commit to halting or phasing out new oil and gas drilling on public lands, including in the Eastern Colorado RMP. **Nearly a quarter** of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions come

from fossil fuels extracted on public lands, making BLM land-use policy an essential part of any federal plan to reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change.

But fossil-fuel production on federal lands **surged** even during the Obama administration, and the Interior Department under President Donald Trump — led by **former oil and gas lobbyist** and Colorado native David Bernhardt — is determined to increase it even further, in pursuit of its so-called "**energy dominance**" goals. In the draft Eastern Colorado plan released last week, the BLM rejected activists' calls for a halt to new drilling on climate grounds.

“The BLM has no suitable thresholds or standards to measure and compare the significance of impacts related to greenhouse gas emissions under those alternatives relative to other alternatives,” reads the plan.

"It's just a cop-out," says McKinnon. "There are any number of ways that the BLM could set substantive thresholds for emissions if it wanted to. There have been numerous studies published that estimate a carbon budget for the U.S. in order to meet the Paris Accord goals. There are a number of things that they could do if they wanted to. What that statement says most loudly is they don't want to."

In the Eastern Colorado RMP, the BLM estimates that between now and 2037, oil production in the region will more than double, and natural gas production could more than triple, leading to a threefold increase in carbon emissions originating from public lands in the eastern part of the state.

While most of the oil and gas produced in Colorado is extracted on privately owned land in Weld County and elsewhere, all of the drilling on public lands can add up — particularly as the Trump administration continues to open up more land for development in other parts of Colorado and the West. Another new resource plan due later this year, the **Uncompahgre RMP**, could facilitate new drilling across nearly 700,000 acres of BLM lands on the Western Slope, and other revisions could be in the works.

The BLM's plans for continued expansion of fossil-fuel extraction could put the agency at odds with Governor Jared Polis, who ran on a platform of strong action to combat climate change and protect Colorado's public lands. Last month Polis signed into law the **Colorado Climate Action Plan**, which commits the state to achieving a 50 percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and a 90 percent cut by 2050.

"The big picture going forward with these RMPs is that if the Polis administration cares about meeting its climate goals under the new law, it's going to have to weigh in," McKinnon says. "Because all indications are that the BLM is running in the opposite direction from Colorado's climate law, and quickly."

Amid growing awareness of the climate crisis and demands from voters for stronger federal action to reduce carbon emissions, at least three 2020 Democratic presidential candidates have **endorsed a ban** on all new fossil fuel development on public lands. In a **plan released Monday**, Washington Governor Jay Inslee proposed not only to immediately ban new public oil and gas leases, but to "cancel and refuse to extend existing fossil fuel leases, to the extent allowed under current law."

"With each passing year, the climate crisis becomes more urgent," says McKinnon. "And we find ourselves in a new world in terms of what needs to be done to meet the worsening crisis."