



HEADLINES

- >Local News
- >State/Regional News
- >Election 2004
- >Sports
- >Editorial
- >Letters to the Editor
- >Columns
- >Obituaries
- >Town Talk
- >Business
- >Outdoors
- >Lifestyles
- >Religion
- >Teen Zone
- >Off Hours
- >Photo Gallery
- >Public Records
- >In Tomorrow's Edition
- >Articles don't appear?
- >Special Reports

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JOBS

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WEATHER

CUSTOMER SERVICE

FOUR CORNERS

BUSINESS JOURNAL

ADS ONLINE

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Go

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Coalition of groups sue BLM over management plan

By Darren Marcy/The Daily Times
Feb 9, 2004, 10:27 am

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WASHINGTON — A coalition of environmental groups, ranchers and local Navajo tribal entities sued the Bureau of Land Management over the Resource Management Plan approved for the Farmington Field Office in September.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in Washington, alleges the BLM's Resource Management Plan does not comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act and the federal Land Policy Management Act.

It asks the court to set aside the BLM's approval of the Resource Management Plan until it is in compliance with the federal acts, and order the BLM to prepare a new EIS that "properly gives a hard look at the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of gas development in northwest New Mexico and southwest Colorado and includes a reasonable range of alternatives that address conservation of surface resources."

The lawsuit also asks the court to award preliminary and permanent injunctive relief preventing the revised RMP and preventing any further gas development in the San Juan Basin until the agency is in compliance with the federal acts.

Hans Stuart, external affairs chief for the BLM in Santa Fe, said the government can't comment on lawsuits but defended the RMP as "a thorough and comprehensive plan."

"This lawsuit is the last resort to stop unprecedented damage from time sensitive energy projects," said Dan Randolph, organizer for the San Juan Citizens Alliance, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, in a news release.

"We tried every step of the way to offer responsible compromise solutions to this planning process. But the Bureau of Land Management ignored the efforts of community groups, Navajo chapters, landowners and the public in its rush to fast-track a national energy plan."

The lawsuit lists six causes of action.

- Failure to prepare a basinwide EIS or analyze the cumulative impacts of gas development across the San Juan Basin.
- Failure to analyze a range of reasonable alternatives.
- Failure to take a hard look at the impacts of gas development on other resources, including air, water, range and cultural resources.
- Failure to adequately consult with Indian tribes and identify properties of traditional religious and cultural importance for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Failure to adopt mitigation measures sufficient to comply with applicable federal and state pollution standards.
- Failure to prevent undue and unnecessary degradation of resources.

"The Bush administration is promoting a single use of the public's lands — energy development — at the expense of many other valuable uses including ranching and recreation," said Sharon Buccino of the National Resources Defense Council. "People in New Mexico and across the country are being run over by the Bush administration's pro-industry policies, which are bad for our environment and bad for the public."

Navajo chapter leaders said the plan wouldn't protect their culture or the land.

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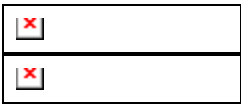
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“The BLM’s proposal will directly impact thousands of cultural sites, many of which hold great importance to the members of Diné, yet we were not consulted,” said Sam Sage, president of the Counselor Chapter. “Raising oil and gas development to the dominant use of the land at all of our expense is irresponsible and simply shortsighted.”

The lawsuit says the RMP would allow for 9,942 new oil and gas wells at a rate of 500 per year for the next 20 years on BLM land.

It would also allow 12,200 new well-head compressors, 319 larger compressors, more than 1,000 miles of new roads and 44,300 acres of additional surface disturbance, on BLM land only.

Additional wells on nonfederal leases would result in a total of 12,461 new wells within the planning area by 2004, according to the lawsuit.

In addition to the BLM, the lawsuit also names the Department of Interior, BLM Director Kathleen Clarke, Secretary of Interior Gale Norton, and New Mexico BLM Director Linda Rundell as defendants.

The suit was filed by the San Juan Citizens Alliance, Dine Care, the Oil and Gas Accountability Project, Natural Resources Defense Council, Tweetie Blancett, Don Schrieber and the Counselor, Pueblo Pintado and Huerfano chapters of the Navajo Nation.

The complete 47-page lawsuit can be found on the San Juan Citizens Alliance Web site and the Resource Management Plan can be downloaded from the BLM’s Web site.

On the Net:

San Juan Citizens Alliance: www.sanjuancitizens.org

BLM Farmington Field Office: www.nm.blm.gov/ffo/ffo_home.html

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[Top of Page](#)