



Otero Mesa, New Mexico

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THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Too Wild to Drill

Otero Mesa, New Mexico

What's at Stake?

Otero Mesa encompasses 1.2 million acres of Chihuahuan Desert grassland between the Hueco and Guadalupe Mountains in eastern New Mexico. This expanse of pristine and rugged wildlife habitat – an hour's drive from El Paso, Texas and the U.S.-Mexico border – is home to New Mexico's healthiest and purest herd of pronghorn; unlike most herds in the state which have required supplemental reintroduction, the Otero Mesa pronghorn thrive in their rich habitat.

The Greater Otero Mesa Area also provides crucial wintering ground for the burrowing owl, countless raptor species, and migratory songbirds, including Baird's sparrow and lark bunting. In addition, many birds winter in Otero Mesa due to the abundance of vital seeds that only this remote native grassland can provide. As recently as April 2006, the endangered

Aplomado falcon, listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1986, was sighted in the area.

In addition to wildlife viewing, the area provides numerous recreational opportunities, including hiking, camping, and horseback riding, and is home to several independent cattle ranches, some of which have been owned by the same families for five generations. The area is known for its wilderness-quality lands. The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance has identified more than 520,000 acres suitable for wilderness protection in the Greater Otero Mesa Area. Sportsmen enjoy this area when it is open to bow and muzzle-loading seasons.

The Salt Basin, located beneath Otero Mesa, is an aquifer containing a substantial water reserve for the region. The state formally declared this reserve as the Salt Underground Water Basin, indicating interest in the aquifer as a source of drinking water for New Mexicans.

Protection Status

Otero Mesa has been the subject of a controversial Bureau of Land Management (BLM) process to amend the Resource Management Plan. Throughout the process, which will determine how the wilderness, wildlife, and recreational values of the Otero Mesa are managed for the next 20 years, the vast majority of comments to the BLM recommended stronger protections for Otero Mesa's fragile grasslands. Comments urging the BLM to adopt protective measures came from a wide variety of groups including sportsmen, ranchers, private citizens, conservation groups, and numerous state agencies.

BLM's proposed plan for the Otero Mesa, unveiled in early 2004, opened 95 percent of the Otero Mesa grasslands to oil and gas development. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson issued an executive order directing "all appropriate and relevant state agencies to provide support for the utmost protection of these grasslands as a matter of state policy" and submitted his own plan for managing the Otero Mesa region.

Conservation groups and three New Mexico agencies filed formal protests pointing out that the BLM had failed to adequately protect the natural values of the grasslands, its wildlife, water, and wilderness qualities. Because the BLM had not fulfilled its legal obligations as required by the National Environmental Policy Act,

"There's some areas out there that should be out of the drilling because they're vulnerable. It's a matter of survival for all of us. If we can't get them stopped, we're through. All we get out of it is destruction."

— BOB JONES, OTERO MESA RANCHER

the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and the Endangered Species Act, the protesters requested that BLM prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Instead the BLM published a far less comprehensive document which did little to redress the agency's failings. A Governor's Consistency Review was also submitted, detailing the many ways that the BLM's plan to open the Otero Mesa to oil and gas development conflicted with existing state law and policies.

As a result of the BLM's decision to ignore the overwhelming local, regional, and even national support for protecting Otero Mesa, Governor Bill Richardson and

Protection Status, continued

State Attorney General Patricia Madrid and conservation groups brought separate legal actions challenging BLM's management plan. In a September 27, 2006 ruling, a federal district court in New Mexico, while not throwing out BLM's plan, validated arguments made by the State of New Mexico and conservation groups that the BLM must thoroughly analyze the

potential environmental damage of oil and gas development prior to selling leases on Otero Mesa. However, both the State and conservation groups are considering appealing the ruling because they believe environmental analysis should be conducted at the planning level, where it can take into account and better protect the desert grassland landscape. ■

Why is the Otero Mesa at Risk?

Despite Otero Mesa's natural, wild values, the oil and gas industry is moving aggressively to turn this unique landscape into a full-scale industrial zone. The industry has nominated 250,000 acres for lease sale in the heart of Otero Mesa for oil and gas exploration; 51,000 acres are already under lease.

The BLM's management plan, which opens the vast majority of the area to oil and gas development, will not protect this fragile grassland, the habitat of the endangered Aplomado falcon, or the irreplaceable water resources beneath. The Otero Mesa RMP Amendment will promote nearly unrestrained oil and gas development by:

- Opening 1.4 million acres of the Otero Mesa and Nutt Chihuahuan Desert Grassland Areas (in Sierra County) to oil and gas leasing, nearly twice the area originally proposed for leasing in the BLM's draft plan.
- Allowing oil and gas leasing and development without the protections originally proposed by BLM for

this special area. The agency eliminated major protective measures from the Draft RMP/EIS issued in October of 2000, so the BLM's current proposal weakens protection for the land, air and water, while reducing the responsibilities of the oil and gas industry, which wants to drill in this wild place.

- Imposing no specific limits or conditions to protect the Salt Basin regional aquifer.
- Relying upon inadequate protective measures that are unproven, seemingly without scientific basis, vague, difficult to enforce, and unlikely to result in real protection of the grasslands.

If implemented, the Otero RMP would open 95 percent of Otero Mesa to oil and gas development, despite the agency's own questions about the region's oil and gas resources, as summed up by New Mexico BLM State Director Linda Rundell, who in 2004 said, "I think there's a huge question mark about whether there's ever going to be an economically viable resource that anyone will want to produce...It's really pretty small potatoes." ■

Current Oil and Gas Development

Five natural gas wells have been drilled in the greater Otero Mesa area, three of which came up dry. Another well is proposed for this fall. Given the low energy potential, the associated costs of water contamination and road building, and the irreplaceable nature of the area's wilderness values, drilling in Otero Mesa makes little sense. In a broader regional context, drilling raises heightened concerns because:

- In nearby Carlsbad, the dramatic increase in drilling in surrounding areas has resulted in contaminated wells and noise and air pollution.
- Potential groundwater pollution is at the heart of the threats to the greater Otero Mesa area.

Current drilling practices require the use of chemical agents — many of which are suspected carcinogens that are used the entire duration of the drilling process — that can potentially contaminate groundwater.

- Conservative estimates show that there is enough fresh potable water underlying Otero Mesa to serve a community of over 500,000 people for over fifty years.
- The energy industry and its allies, optimistically estimate that the amount of natural gas underlying Otero Mesa would provide the supply for approximately 16 days of current national demand. ■

Where is the Otero Mesa?



Solution

Governor Richardson has proposed designation of a National Conservation Area for some 640,000 acres of Otero Mesa. Because protective congressional designation is a long and arduous process, Congress should act quickly to protect Otero Mesa and withdraw it from potential oil and gas leasing and development.

Meanwhile, the Otero Mesa management plan must provide protective stipulations and other requirements that protect the area's wildlife, natural beauty, and water supply. There are some places too valuable and too vulnerable to risk oil and gas development with little or no prospects for real benefits. With its massive Salt Basin aquifer underlying incomparable wild desert grasslands, Otero Mesa is such a place. ■

For More Information

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- On the web at: <http://www.wilderness.org/WhereWeWork/NewMexico/otero.cfm>

TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>