



Chihuahuan Desert Rivers in southeastern New Mexico makes list of 15 wild areas at high risk of development for oil, gas and other resources

New report shines spotlight on important wild lands that must be protected

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Albuquerque, NM - (September 19, 2017) -- A [new report](#) released today by The Wilderness Society raises the alarm about the Chihuahuan Desert Rivers region of southeast New Mexico and other wild lands across the U.S. threatened by extractive industries seeking to develop the resources on or underneath them, including oil, gas and coal.

[‘Too Wild To Drill’](#) identifies 15 unique places found on public lands that are at high risk of drilling, mining and other development—and the damage and destruction that will inevitably follow. Despite the National Park Service repeatedly raising concerns about oil and gas drilling near Carlsbad Caverns National Park, the federal and state lands surrounding the Delaware, Pecos and Black rivers, as well as the cave system and aquifer below are largely leased for oil and gas. Twisted among the wells and pads is a spider web of pipelines and roads that contribute to habitat loss and fragmentation.

“Now is the time for action if we want to protect New Mexico’s most-sensitive rivers and the underground patchwork of waterways that feed our internationally renowned caverns,” said [Michael Casaus](#), New Mexico state director for The Wilderness Society. “The BLM is evaluating management plans for the region and the uncertainty about future safeguards to protect sensitive areas from the expansive energy footprint leave the ecology, economy, recreation opportunities and southeast New Mexico’s future at risk. The Chihuahuan Desert Rivers region must be protected.”

The Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) own analysis shows the Carlsbad area is expected to see 800 new oil and gas wells per year moving forward. These developments show no sign of slowing as large companies flock to this production hot spot. Oil and gas development can be devastating to the Desert Rivers ecosystems. Toxic spills and production activities can result in surface and groundwater contamination, habitat fragmentation, increased road traffic and air pollution.

“In addition to the wildlife habitat and fragile ecosystems in the Chihuahuan Desert Rivers region, a mostly unexplored system of caves lies underneath that could be connected to Carlsbad Caverns National Park,” said [Ernie Atencio](#), New Mexico program manager for National Parks Conservation Association. “People travel from throughout the country and around the world to visit this UNESCO World Heritage site, as well as neighboring Guadalupe Mountains National Park. These are unique resources and a major driver for the local economy, but in recent years exploratory wells have run into empty space at about the same level as Carlsbad’s caverns and we have no idea what kinds of impacts that kind of drilling and development could have.”

According to the report, The BLM has an opportunity to protect the Chihuahuan Desert Rivers from destructive oil and gas drilling, both in the Carlsbad resource management plan currently under revision and when it considers specific leasing and drilling proposals in the area. For now, there is only a small amount of energy infrastructure in the riparian areas, giving the BLM an opportunity to ensure the development explosion in the Permian Basin doesn’t permanently destroy rare desert river systems, remaining intact grasslands and sensitive cave ecosystems.

“This is one example of the kind of thoughtless leasing and development we are seeing nibbling around the edges of parks and wild places around the country,” said Atencio. “If BLM plans better from the start, it will avoid conflicts around development and protect unique and sensitive places.”

The release of ‘Too Wild Too Drill’ falls during [numerous reviews](#) of public lands policies, ordered by President Donald Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, that are taking place behind closed doors with little or no public oversight or accountability. This month also marks the end of the 180-day review period established by President Trump’s “Energy Independence and Economic Growth” [Executive Order](#). The directive requires federal agencies to review any regulations that could “potentially burden” fossil fuel development.

The Wilderness Society issues a new version of ‘Too Wild To Drill’ every few years to call attention to vulnerable places on public lands. In this edition, other places highlighted include the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the most remote and wild places left in the world, as well as:

- Greater Grand Canyon Watershed, Arizona
- Mojave Trails National Monument, California
- North Fork of the Gunnison, Colorado
- Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Minnesota
- Badger-Two Medicine, Montana
- Paradise Valley, Montana
- Owyhee Desert Sagebrush, Nevada
- Wayne National Forest, Ohio
- Bears Ears National Monument, Utah
- Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah
- Appalachian Trail, Virginia
- Green River Valley, Washington
- Northern Red Desert, Wyoming

“Once these lands are gone, they’re gone, and we can never get them back,” said Casaus. “Striking a balance between energy development and conserving our most treasured lands and waters should be a priority for land managers. The federal government, energy companies and other special interests should stop working to open up our last remaining wild places for development.”

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The Wilderness Society is the leading conservation organization working to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places. Founded in 1935, and now with more than one million members and supporters, The Wilderness Society has led the effort to permanently protect 109 million acres of wilderness and to ensure sound management of our shared national lands.

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