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Broad Coalition Sends Message to BLM: Do Oil & Gas Right

Ranchers, Tribal Chapters, Conservationists Push for stronger protections in the San Juan Basin

Farmington, New Mexico - A diverse coalition of ranchers, local Navajo governments and environmental groups joined together to change the Bureau of Land Management's decision to authorize nearly 10,000 new oil and gas wells in the San Juan Basin. The group filed in Federal District Court, in Washington, D.C. arguing that the BLM's decision will lead to destruction of the ranching economy, the region's air quality, and thousands of Native American cultural sites and assets. The group also points out that the BLM failed miserably to consult with the Navajo Nation, traditionally known as Diné, and communities, as required by law.

So far, the BLM has not demonstrated that it can handle the drilling that's already underway. With 18,000 producing oil and gas wells already in the San Juan Basin, BLM's critics point out that the agency's Farmington Field Office is already struggling with ongoing enforcement problems for current oil and gas operations, and air pollution that threatens to exceed federal safety limits. In the decision being challenged, the BLM authorized:

- 9,942 new oil and gas wells
- 12,200 new wellhead compressors
- 319 larger compressors
- 75,000 tons of air contaminants
- 1,000 miles of new roads
- 44,300 acres of additional disturbance

“The BLM is approving massive new development, yet they are clearly not able to handle the soil, range, water, air and wildlife impacts that are overwhelming communities throughout the Basin from the existing development alone,” said Tweeti Blancett, a rancher in the Basin and a member of the San Juan Citizens Alliance. “Without intervention, this new development will take place on the backs of ranchers, landowners and residents of this Basin.”

“The BLM's own analysis shows that this oil and gas development will drastically degrade our air quality and they are just passing the buck on meaningful management of these impacts,” said Jennifer Goldman, of the Oil and Gas Accountability Project.

The BLM's proposal authorizes gas drilling on and near two mesas -- *Chol'i'i* ("Gobernador Knob") and *Dzilnahodilii* ("Huerfano Mesa") -- that are sacred to the Navajo people. Navajo (Diné) sacred mesas are intertwined with spiritual beliefs. "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 pollution from the oil and gas development will affect our children's health and our livestock," stated Billy Chiquito, president of Pueblo Pintado Chapter. Three Navajo Chapters, Counselor, Pueblo Pintado and Huerfano have joined the lawsuit to protect their cultural resources and the health of their communities.

"This lawsuit is a last resort to stop unprecedented damage from "time sensitive" energy projects," said Dan Randolph, organizer for San Juan Citizens Alliance. "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 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 NRDC senior attorney Sharon Buccino. "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."

Plaintiffs in the legal challenge to the Final Environmental Impact Statement and the Record of Decision issued by the Bureau of Land Management for expanded oil and gas development in the San Juan Basin include: the Counselor, Huerfano and Pueblo Pintado Chapters of the Navajo Nation, local ranchers Tweeti Blancett and Don Schreiber, and non-profit groups Diné CARE, the San Juan Citizens Alliance, the Oil & Gas Accountability Project, and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

(This press release and pictures of the affected area will be posted at www.sanjuancitizens.org and <http://dinecare.indigenousnative.org> at 12:00 pm Mountain Time on Wednesday.)

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