



WESTERN RESOURCE ADVOCATES

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House Committee to Hear Pitfalls of Rushing Forward on Oil Shale Westerners Caution: Go Slow on Oil Shale

The U.S. Interior Department's effort to fast-track commercial leasing of federal oil shale resources in western Colorado is cause for alarm for local communities and natural resources, Western Slope rancher Kathleen Sullivan Kelley will tell a Congressional Committee tomorrow, April 17, in Washington D.C.

Of particular concern to Kelley are Interior Department actions apparently aimed at skirting safeguards mandated by federal law and leasing lands for commercial oil shale development before feasibility, impact, and safety studies are finished.

Kelley, who is a rancher and fourth generation Coloradoan, will testify before Congress along with other Westerners on the impacts the Oil and Gas Provisions of the 2005 Energy Policy Act are having on the West. Kelley and her Western Slope neighbors lived through oil shale's boom and bust in the early 1980s. This time around she wants to ensure the Federal Government goes slow, and takes the time to fully consider the impacts of oil shale development before commercial leasing is allowed.

"I witnessed firsthand the terrible fallout from the oil shale bust in western Colorado," said Kathleen Sullivan Kelley. "We cannot let the mistakes of the past be repeated. Before the government unleashes oil shale development on western Colorado again, we have to know that the technology works and that it won't foul our air and water."

The 2005 Energy Policy Act included provisions on oil shale calling for research projects to be evaluated to determine the feasibility and impacts of oil shale development. The legislation also states that commercial leasing of public land for oil shale development can occur only if, after consulting with state and local government officials, "sufficient support and interest" is found in a state.

"It is incredibly worrisome that the Bureau of Land Management seems dead set on pushing forward with the adoption of a full scale commercial oil shale leasing program, even though the technology isn't ready, they have not completed the necessary environmental reviews, and they have not yet consulted with the affected communities or state officials," Kelley said.

Advancing Solutions for the Western Environment

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In budget documents submitted to Congress, BLM officials stated their intent to proceed with a commercial oil shale lease sale by the end of 2008 but made no mention of the consultation that must precede such a sale. “The Energy Policy Act was crystal clear that a lease sale could not occur until after the BLM consulted with state and local officials to see if they supported it. Yet the BLM’s budget documents make no mention of the agency’s duty to consult with these stakeholders. Apparently the BLM intends to rush forward with commercial leasing in 2008, without asking state or local officials whether they want it or not,” said Bob Randall, who focuses on oil shale issues for Western Resource Advocates, a non-profit conservation group in Colorado.

Kelley will also formally submit a letter tomorrow on behalf of 21 elected officials from Northwestern Colorado alerting Congress to their serious concerns over oil shale and the BLM’s proposed timeline for commercial leasing. These officials are urging Congress to review the current statutes that apply to the BLM’s oil shale leasing program, and to take the steps necessary to assure that the BLM does not imprudently rush into a commercial scale program before understanding the full array of impacts from the development of this resource.

“We are primarily concerned about the actual economic viability of oil shale development and the potential effects this project might have on our air quality, water quality and soil,” said Steamboat Springs City Council Member Ken Brenner, one of the signers of the letter. “At this point I think the BLM is pushing forward much too quickly.”

Energy companies with an interest in developing oil shale on the Western Slope have publicly stated that they are years away from deciding if commercial-scale production makes sense. “This headlong rush to develop a commercial oil shale program and fast-track long-term commercial leases is ill-advised and unnecessary,” said Cathy Kay of Western Colorado Congress in Grand Junction. “Even the energy companies are saying that they won’t know if they have commercially viable technology until the first part of the next decade. The Federal Government needs to go slow on oil shale.”

Under the BLM’s proposed 2008 timeline for a commercial lease sale, results from the current oil shale research and development program would not yet be available for review by the time of the lease sales. Federal land managers, state and local governments, and members of the public would not yet know the likely environmental impacts, technical viability, or energy and personnel needs associated with the commercial development of the West’s oil shale resources.

For a copy of the letter from Northwestern Colorado elected officials, please contact bob@westernresources.org.

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Western Resource Advocates is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to protecting the Interior West’s land, air, and water. For more information, visit www.westernresourceadvocates.org.