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Lawmakers join quest to protect Desolation Canyon

Drilling plan • Gasco nearing approval for plan to develop field near popular float put-in.

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Several members of Congress have joined environmentalists and outdoor recreation enthusiasts in asking federal land managers to back off of drilling gas wells around Desolation Canyon.

The Gasco drilling plan, due for final approval after a comment period closes on Monday, brings wells to the doorstep of Sand Wash, a popular float-trip access point for the wild Green River Canyon in eastern Utah. The plan already has drawn a personal appeal from Peter Metcalf, president of Salt Lake City-based outdoor equipment maker Black Diamond Equipment.



Tribune file photo Desolation Canyon.

This week, representatives from Eastern states, and Arizona and Colorado added their support for preserving the canyon's remoteness.

"Though the [Bureau of Land Management] recognizes that Desolation Canyon is a wilderness resource, the area is managed under a significantly flawed plan finalized in the last administration," the representatives wrote Tuesday to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, "and those values are not being upheld."

The letter is signed by Democratic backers of the proposed America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, a sweeping but long-unfulfilled wish to protect 9 million acres in Utah. Six lawmakers, Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y.; Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass.; Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz.; Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va.; Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J.; and Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., signed the letter.

They prefer "Alternative E," an option for 1,114 wells that the BLM studied but initially dropped in favor of a plan for 1,298 wells in the 207,000-acre expanse on the West Tavaputs Plateau of Uintah, Carbon and Duchesne counties. The more aggressive plan would put wells within sight and hearing range of the Sand Wash float put-in, and from the river for a few miles.

“Alternative E is consistent with the President’s commitment to develop our nation’s natural gas resources in a way that does not sacrifice clean air, clean water, or our wild public lands,” they wrote in the letter, which the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance has posted to its website in an effort to rally more comments like it.

It’s the same alternative that Metcalf and others in the outdoor industry suggested. But, though it has friends in Congress, none of them is from Utah.

“The BLM came up with a balanced approach,” said Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah. Desolation Canyon is “a special place and it merits protection,” he said, but land managers have taken it into account.

Matheson said he sat down with agency managers who explained their plan to his satisfaction. “I bet nobody who has signed that letter has done that.”

“They are opposed to anything short of locking up the areas that are included in the Hinchey [Red Rock] wilderness bill,” said Melissa Subbotin, spokeswoman for Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah. “The congressman opposes those legislative efforts, which would have a devastating impact on the rural economies.

“It’s concerning anytime East Coast politicians try to dictate how states in the West may utilize their onerous and abundant federal lands.”

Steve Bloch, attorney and energy program director for SUWA, said it’s disappointing that Utah leaders didn’t take the same approach with two recent drilling compromises — in Nine Mile Canyon on West Tavaputs and Greater Natural Buttes in the Uinta Basin — to allow extensive drilling while protecting the most sensitive areas.

Gasco did not engage in negotiations the way Bill Barrett Corp. and Anadarko did on the others, he said.

Gasco said in a prepared statement that it had met with conservation groups a dozen times in recent years — including more than six times last year.

“We are confident we can develop the resources in our project area in an environmentally responsible manner and for the benefit of the American people,” the company said. “We have been responsive to many of [environmentalists’] concerns, and made sensible compromises, such as removing from our proposal all wells that would be visible from the Green River.”

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For information or to comment by Monday deadline

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