



Reporter Memo: Upper Colorado River Oil and Gas Plan

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On June 23, 2022 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) initiated the public scoping period for a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) to the Colorado River Valley and Grand Junction Resource Management Plans (RMPs); additional information can be found [here](#) and [here](#). The SEIS will revisit oil and gas management decisions for nearly 2 million acres of federal minerals in western Colorado and will specifically analyze the climate impacts of leasing and development on public lands.

This memo is designed to provide background on the SEIS, explain why this SEIS is important to western Colorado, and describe the opportunities and anticipated decisions affecting Colorado's public lands and climate that will result from the SEIS process.

Background and Process

- BLM finalized the Colorado River Valley and Grand Junction RMPs in 2015, after nearly decade-long planning processes. These plans dictate how nearly 2 million acres of public lands and minerals, largely within the Piceance Basin, will be managed for the next 20 years. In addition to the thousands of oil and gas wells that already exist in the area, BLM anticipated thousands of new wells would be drilled in coming years. The plans created a presumption that oil and gas can and should be the dominant use, even in places where other incompatible values exist and areas where BLM has concluded that oil and gas development is unlikely, and opened 80% of the planning area (1.5 million acres) to oil and gas leasing and development.
- In 2016, [Wilderness Workshop](#) and conservation partners [filed a lawsuit](#) on the Colorado River Valley RMP challenging BLM's failure to analyze the climate impacts of its decision, or to consider alternatives that would limit new oil and gas leasing in order to protect other public lands values such as wildlife habitat, recreation and wilderness. In 2018, [we prevailed in federal court](#) and the agency was ordered to reconsider portions of the plan pertaining to oil and gas development and climate analysis.
- In 2019, Wilderness Workshop and conservation partners filed a similar lawsuit on the Grand Junction RMP. BLM [voluntarily remanded the oil and gas portions of that plan](#) as well, as similar flaws plagued both RMPs.
- As a result of these two lawsuits, BLM is now conducting an SEIS for both RMPs in order to more thoroughly analyze the climate impacts of new oil and gas development and to consider closing additional public lands to oil and gas leasing.

- The SEIS is a public process conducted pursuant to the [National Environmental Policy Act \(NEPA\)](#), which will include the following opportunities for public participation:
 - o *Scoping* – The BLM is providing a 30-day scoping period during which the public can submit comments identifying key issues for the agency to address in the SEIS process. BLM will also host 2 virtual [public meetings on July 12 and 13](#). Comments will be due on July 25, 2022.
 - o *Draft SEIS* – The BLM will then release a Draft SEIS for public review and comment. The Draft SEIS will include the agency’s analysis of potential oil and gas impacts on resources such as wildlife, water and climate, and alternatives for opening and closing public lands to oil and gas leasing. There will be a 90-day public comment period on the Draft SEIS. The BLM intends to release the Draft SEIS in spring 2023.
 - o *Final SEIS* – The BLM will then release a Final SEIS, which incorporates comments received on the Draft SEIS. The Final SEIS will identify a proposed management plan, and there will be a formal protest period and governor’s consistency review. The BLM intends to release the Final SEIS in winter 2023.
 - o *Record of Decision (ROD)* – The BLM will then sign a Record of Decision, and begin implementing the new plan. The agency intends to have the plan complete by spring 2024.

- The outcome of the SEIS will be new planning decisions for western Colorado’s public lands that determine where and how oil and gas leasing and development can occur for the next 20 years or more.

Why the SEIS matters to Western Coloradans

The SEIS planning area, which includes the entire Grand Junction and Colorado River Valley field offices, includes 1.5 million acres of public land and 2 million acres of federal minerals in western Colorado. This region contains some of our state’s most important wildlife habitat, treasured recreation areas, wildlands that should be protected for future generations, critical water resources, famed Colorado scenery and Indigenous cultural sites. Beyond the on-the-ground values of these public lands, oil and gas development is a major driver of climate change that is already impacting our communities, agriculture, water, wildlife and way of life. The SEIS is an opportunity for the BLM to take a hard look at the climate impacts of oil and gas drilling and make decisions to minimize and mitigate those impacts, including severe drought and massive wildfires, for the benefit of Colorado’s future.

Fossil Fuel Development on Public Lands

A key outcome of Wilderness Workshop’s successful legal challenge is the court’s finding that the BLM hasn’t taken a hard look at the true impacts of federal oil and gas development on our climate, meaning the BLM has to complete a more thorough analysis of those impacts. Better climate analysis can and should lead to better climate decisions – a true accounting of the climate impacts of our federal oil and gas program shows that we must immediately [phase out new fossil fuel leasing](#) to avoid catastrophic climate change. Similar court decisions have been emerging around the country, requiring the BLM to take a deeper dive into the climate impacts of its fossil fuel decisions at multiple levels. Colorado is a [climate change hot spot](#) and the SEIS presents the best and most important opportunity we have to analyze those impacts and reduce climate pollution from our public lands.

Resources regarding oil and gas impacts:

- Fossil fuels from federal lands produced the equivalent of nearly a quarter of the United States' total carbon dioxide emissions over a 10-year period, according to a [scientific analysis](#) by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).
- Thousands of people in the SEIS planning area live within a half-mile of active oil and gas wells, compressors and processors – [the radius at which peer-reviewed studies](#) have documented potential health impacts resulting from oil and gas pollution.
- Greenhouse gas emissions from federal lands are on pace to [drastically exceed](#) the reductions needed to meet climate targets established by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).
- Federal fossil fuels that have not been leased to industry [contain](#) up to 450 billion tons of potential climate pollution. Pollution from already-leased fossil fuels on federal lands, if fully developed, would exhaust the U.S. carbon budget for keeping the world below a 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature increase.

Recreation, Wildlife and Wilderness Values

Oil and gas extraction includes wells and well pads, gas lines, roads, hydraulic fracturing and other infrastructure that destroy habitat for wildlife, degrade recreation experiences, impact the health and quality of life for nearby communities, and damage other public lands resources. [Spills occur frequently](#) and can contaminate water resources that are used for drinking water, agriculture, and recreation.

Demonstrating the reckless oil and gas decisions made in the 2015 Grand Junction RMP, some of the oil and gas leases that were [issued in the immediate aftermath of finalizing the RMP](#) included lease parcels near three state parks, a migratory bird hotspot, the site of the “18 Hours of Fruita” mountain-bike race, within a half-mile of a K-12 public school in De Beque and beneath Vega Reservoir, an important area for wildlife, recreation, and irrigation.

Now, the BLM has an opportunity to refine the areas open for oil and gas leasing and make sounder decisions to protect communities and natural resources. Some of the locally treasured public lands that should be protected from oil and gas development in the SEIS include:

- *Dolores River*: The Lower Dolores River is comprised of a collection of deep sandstone canyons, vibrant riparian corridors, and sprawling unroaded wildlands surrounding the Dolores River between Roc Creek, Gateway, and the Utah state line. Petroglyphs, pictographs, and other culturally important sites are found throughout the river corridor. Several of the river’s tributaries act as important transportation corridors with game trails leading up into the forested highlands of the Uncompahgre Plateau and La Sal Mountains, many of which were used by and retain cultural significance to Indigenous people. Much of the Lower Dolores is open to oil and gas leasing and development, despite the immense values that would be put at risk by development and the area’s low potential for fluid mineral resources.
- *Grand Hogback*: The Grand Hogback is an immediately recognizable feature to travelers on the I-70 corridor, a unique landscape of flatirons and fins cascading from a central monocline. According to the BLM, the Hogback contains one of the largest Ute habitation (wickiup) sites in Colorado, composed of the remnants of at least 80 structural features. In addition to wilderness-quality public lands, cultural and historic resources, and year-round wildlife habitat, a popular mountain biking trail network is being developed with easy access from Rifle. During the Colorado River Valley RMP revision, the BLM decided against managing the Grand Hogback to protect its wilderness-quality

lands and associated values due to the presence of non-producing oil and gas leases. Since the RMP was finalized, almost all of the leases in the Grand Hogback expired without ever going into production, and the BLM has a chance with the SEIS to make a smarter management decision and prioritize other public lands resources over oil and gas speculation.

- *Grand Junction Book Cliffs:* The dramatic backdrop for more than 150,000 people who call the Grand Valley home, the Book Cliffs not only provide incredible recreation opportunities, but are home to important wildlife habitat and wilderness-quality lands. From the world-famous biking trails of the North Fruita Desert, to the quiet solitude of Hunter Canyon and Lipan Wash, to the unique bird species occupying Prairie Canyon, to the forested high country popular for its renowned big game habitat, the Book Cliffs contain a wealth of resources and are recovering from the massive Pine Gulch fire of 2020. While the area has seen some oil and gas development over the decades, much of the area is considered to have low potential. BLM must end the speculative leasing in these important areas adjacent to the communities of the Grand Valley and ensure that the area remains not just a scenic backdrop, but a home to important wildlife habitats and recreation opportunities.
- *Upper Colorado and Roaring Fork Valleys:* The public lands surrounding the Colorado and Roaring Fork Rivers above their confluence in Glenwood Springs are highly valued recreation areas in western Colorado. The Roaring Fork Valley's BLM-managed public lands include locals' favorites such as the Crown, Red Hill, and Thompson Creek – popular spots for mountain biking, hiking, and climbing right out the backdoor of valley communities. The Colorado River corridor from State Bridge to Glenwood Canyon is also surrounded by BLM-managed public lands that attract recreation visitors for boating, mountain biking, and hiking at the scenic foot of the Flat Tops Wilderness. Despite managing many of these areas for recreation purposes, the BLM left them largely open to oil and gas leasing in the 2015 RMP.

Public Support for Conserving Public Lands

Polling shows that Coloradans support a more balanced approach to land management, rather than prioritizing oil and gas development over all other uses. The [2022 Conservation in the West Poll](#) found that:

- 75% of Coloradans “think that oil and gas development on national public lands should be stopped or strictly limited, as opposed to expanded.”
- 83% “support a national goal of protecting 30% of America’s lands and waters by 2030.”