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Preserving Adobe Town comes first

Tuesday, January 24, 2006

Our view

Industry needs to negotiate in good faith with conservation groups that challenged an Adobe Town seismic survey project.

What do you think?

We welcome viewpoints from readers on this and other issues.

"I believe whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth." -- Rachel Carson, author/ecologist

Since American explorers discovered Adobe Town in 1869, the instinct of many people who see these historic badlands for the first time is to preserve them.

And who could blame them? This 130-square-mile area in the southern Red Desert is one of the few spots left in the country where visitors can view pristine landscape that stretches from horizon to horizon. It is a priceless treasure that belongs not only to Wyoming, but to the world.

In the endless search for minerals to help fill our nation's energy needs, however, developers have turned to Adobe Town as an untapped resource. This conflict between competing interests has been played out in governmental studies and in the federal courts.

Environmentalists who have been willing to compromise on some land-use issues seem to have -- for good reasons -- drawn a line in the sand when it comes to Adobe Town. When the Bureau of Land Management approved a proposal by two companies to conduct a destructive oil and gas seismic survey project in the area, several groups challenged the ruling.

Earlier this month a federal administrative appeals judge sided with the conservation groups and issued a stay of the project until the case is settled or the Interior Board of Land Appeals issues a ruling on the merits of the challenge.

In our view, it would be best to leave Adobe Town in its natural state, with no mining activity. The Catch-22 of that position is that in order to conclude the oil and gas beneath the surface is not worth recovering, we need to know what those deposits contain.

The surveys proposed by Kerr McGee and Veritas DGC Land Inc. would use 64,000-pound "thumper trucks" to send seismic waves into the ground to help surveyors determine what's under the ground. Picture these 32-ton trucks driving four abreast in the Adobe Town area, each dropping a 6,000-pound vibrator pad every few hundred feet, and you quickly see how ridiculous it is for the BLM to determine that such projects have "no significant environmental impact."

Adobe Town is home to a wide variety of native wildlife, including the prairie falcon, golden eagle, ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, sage grouse and white-tailed prairie dog. Its wild horse herd, which numbers about 1,000 animals, is one of the largest remaining in the West.



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The area is also renowned throughout the world for its fossils of ancient mammals from the Eocene period, between 57 million and 45 million years ago.

The Gridiron

As noted by one of the challenging groups, the Biodiveristy Conservation Alliance, there are less invasive methods to do seismic exploration that have minimal impact on land and wildlife. One method, passive seismic, uses natural micro-earthquakes as a vibration source rather than explosives or thumper trucks. It is more expensive, but it has been used successfully to locate oil and gas deposits in South America.

Sports Goulash

The Lockerroom

Under the recent stay of the project, the judge ordered the conservation groups and the companies involved in the Adobe Town project to negotiate a settlement. We hope the industry takes this demand seriously and does not simply wait to appeal to a higher court.

Wild Things

We also urge the BLM to do its job and conduct a study of the cumulative impacts on wildlife of using thumper trucks.

Inside and Out

The BLM, industry and conservationists need to work together on resolving this dispute in a way that protects this unique resource.

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