

Los Angeles Times
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Oil, Gas Drilling

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WASHINGTON — Placing a heavy emphasis on energy production in the American West, the Bush administration has moved aggressively to open up broad areas of largely unspoiled federal land to oil and gas exploration.

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The administration has pressed for approval of new drilling permits across the Rocky Mountains and lifted protections on hundreds of thousands of acres with gas

and oil reserves in Utah and Colorado. In the process, it has targeted a number of places prized for their scenery, abundant wildlife and clean water, natural assets increasingly valuable to the region's changing economy.

Soon after taking office in 2001, the Bush White House set up a little-known task force that acts as a complaint desk for industry, passing energy company concerns directly to federal land management employees in the field. Although the creation of White House task forces is commonplace, experts on the executive branch say it is unusual to have one primarily serving the interests of a single industry.

In addition, the Bureau of Land Management ([news - web sites](#)) has been pushed to issue drilling permits at a record pace for three of the last four years, an increase of 70% since the Clinton administration.

Internal memos and interviews show senior administration officials have directed federal employees to be responsive to industry, commended offices that approved large numbers of drilling permits and chastised those that were slow.

The effort is so intense in the oil- and gas-rich Rockies that some Bureau of Land Management employees there have taken to calling the region "the OPEC ([news - web sites](#)) states."

The administration says increased drilling is necessary to satisfy America's growing demand for power and to reduce reliance on foreign energy sources. Interior officials say they are proceeding with respect for the land and with input from communities that must cope with the effects of new production.

The acceleration of energy development, however, could transform some of the region's most treasured landscapes, places that call to mind the works of such painters as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, who immortalized the Rocky Mountain region in the late 19th century.

At stake are areas such as New Mexico's Otero Mesa, a lonely stretch of low, knobby mountains incised with Native American petroglyphs that rise out of one of the nation's last Chihuahuan Desert grasslands. And there is Wyoming's Jack Morrow Hills with its towering, multi-hued buttes, undulating sand dunes and herds of rare desert elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. It is also the terminus of the longest wildlife migration route in the continental United States.

The push for oil and gas, which could lead to more than 1,000 wells in the Jack Morrow Hills area, would open the way for networks of roads, pipelines, well heads, generators and waste ponds.

It can take many years for environmental damage to appear. Wild herds don't disappear overnight. Officials of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department warned in a draft report last month that the proliferation of natural gas wells could have a negative effect on deer, elk and pronghorn antelope. The report went on to say that the protective measures by the BLM in Wyoming had been "inconsistently applied" and "frequently modified or waived."

Chris Sullivan, whose family has a ranch near an expanding natural gas field south of Pinedale, Wyo., said he used to see 700 or more antelope on his property during hunting season. "Last fall, I don't think we had 100," Sullivan said. "This summer we've had a handful."

Outlined during the 2000 campaign, the administration's course was set the following year with a national energy plan developed by a Cabinet-level group headed by Vice President Dick Cheney ([news - web sites](#)). Citing executive privilege, the vice president has kept confidential the records of people who met with the group.

The evolving policy is being carried out by senior officials at the Department of Interior, a number of whom have past ties to the energy industry.

Drilling applications are skyrocketing, driven by record-high energy prices and new technology that allows the industry to exploit previously inaccessible supplies.

In a recent interview, Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton said the administration had streamlined some energy production processes, including speeding up oil and gas permits to ease a backlog.

"We have a larger and larger percentage of resources found on federal lands because we have tapped out the reserves now on privately owned lands," Norton said. Nevertheless, "we're really talking about very small areas in comparison to the vast areas of land that we manage."

But she said the BLM had not promoted energy production at the expense of recreation,

conservation and wildlife protection.

Kathleen Clarke, director of the BLM, agreed.

"I absolutely reject the premise that the BLM ignores the bulk of its mission to promote a single use," she said. "When the agency issues oil and gas leases, it's carrying out its multiple-use mission no less than when it issues a special recreation permit."

But government memos, interviews with agency employees and budget documents show that the emphasis on oil and gas is transforming the BLM's historic mission to balance commerce, conservation and recreation on the 262 million acres it oversees.

The shift is stirring resentment not only with some longtime agency staff but among some hunters, ranchers and others who supported President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) in 2000.

"All these farmers and ranchers are fit to be tied about what they consider their administration is doing," said Laurie Goodman, a lifelong Republican who served in the administration of Bush's father and as an aide to a Wyoming senator and who now works with Trout Unlimited, a fishing advocacy group.

Amid growing criticism of its energy policies, the Bush administration is scrambling to polish its environmental image, particularly in such states as New Mexico and Colorado, where the November presidential election could be close.

White House and Interior officials have been working to mend fences with hunting and fishing groups that expressed alarm about the effects of oil and gas policies on wildlife.

Industry executives say that if the administration has made any difference, it has been to restore a proper balance between development and environmental protection. And they say it is the market, not Washington, that is responsible for the upsurge in activity.

"The high rate of drilling in the Rockies is not done on marching orders from Bush-Cheney. But, in fact, is being driven by high prices," Keith O. Rattie, chairman of Questar Corp., said at a recent energy conference in Denver.

Industry experts say the Rocky Mountain region is one of the top six gas-producing areas in the world, with 41% of the potential gas reserves in the U.S., according to one survey. Nationally, 5% of America's oil and 11% of its natural gas are produced domestically from onshore public land.

Yet environmentalists and some current and former BLM officials contend that the administration is sacrificing some of the most spectacular natural spaces in the West for a short-term bump in supplies. Despite all the drilling, they say, foreign imports of oil and gas have not declined. They also say Bush's and Cheney's failure to emphasize energy conservation and alternative sources

is leading to irreversible damage to federal lands, water, air and wildlife.

"Deer, elk, sage grouse, all the charismatic mega-fauna we have tried to protect, are no longer considered to be part of the natural heritage; they're considered impediments to oil and gas development," said Dennis J. Willis, an outdoor recreation planner for the BLM in Utah and a 28-year agency veteran, who made it clear he was speaking for himself and not the bureau. "It's like saying the Vatican ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and the Colosseum are impediments to urban renewal in Rome."

The concerns aren't only about wildlife.

In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, natural gas extraction involves pumping an estimated 60 million gallons of water from methane-laden coal beds to the surface each day. Much of the wastewater is contained in shallow ponds and, in a few cases, reused for livestock and crops. The quality of the pumped water varies widely, but some of it is high in saline and other contaminants.

Ranchers in the Powder River area and in the San Juan Basin in New Mexico have complained that drinking water from their wells has been fouled, that their cattle have died after drinking from contaminated ponds and that water tables are being depleted — all this during a severe drought.

Pulling natural gas from subterranean coal beds — and leasing lands to oil and gas companies in general — took off during the Clinton administration and has accelerated under Bush. BLM officials acknowledge that water-quality issues have been a major challenge, especially with gas extraction from coal beds.

Agency officials say the BLM is pursuing various steps to address the concerns. They say that in the Powder River Basin they are proposing to reduce the amount of wastewater discharged into streams. In the San Juan Basin, the BLM says, it makes companies reinject water that has been pumped out of the ground.

Changing Priorities

The rush to drill is just one of the shifting priorities under the Bush administration that critics say departs from a 40-year tradition of federal land stewardship.

Few decisions have angered critics more than the legal settlement Norton signed last year that effectively reversed the Clinton administration's policy of shielding 2.6 million acres in Utah and 600,000 acres in Colorado from development. The land was being protected by the Department of Interior under a "take care policy" to preserve its wilderness qualities pending an official decision by Congress and the White House.

Soon after the settlement, the BLM began leasing tens of thousands of acres of the area to oil

and gas companies; some of the sites are visible from Dinosaur National Monument.

Norton's settlement reaches well beyond Utah and Colorado, effectively giving up BLM authority to evaluate and provide protection for any other lands proposed for wilderness consideration. Norton maintains that only Congress has the authority to provide such protection.

And Congress has exercised that authority rarely since Bush took office. He has signed legislation preserving 529,604 acres — far fewer than any American president since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964.

In contrast, President Reagan signed legislation preserving 10.6 million acres in his two terms, and George H.W. Bush, the president's father, approved the protection of nearly 4 million acres during his single term. President Clinton ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) ratified the designation of nearly 9.5 million acres during his two terms.

Interior officials said the administration had recently decided to support several bills that would create nearly 900,000 acres of new wilderness. They also said they supported designating another 1.4 million acres of wilderness in the Chugach National Forest in Alaska.

In addition, Norton said the administration had greatly increased funding for grants to states, private landowners and conservation groups to preserve open space and improve habitat.

However, the administration continues to lift restrictions on federal land.

Last month, the Department of Agriculture announced it was rolling back a Clinton administration rule prohibiting new roads on 58 million acres managed by the Forest Service. The ban had kept the remote lands off limits to industry. The BLM administers drilling permits on Forest Service and other federal land, but the Forest Service controls the surface.

The action gave states greater power to decide whether to permit logging, mining or energy exploration in the areas, administration officials said. Energy companies have expressed interest in prospecting for oil and gas in roadless areas ranging from the Badger-Two Medicine region of the Lewis and Clark National Forest near the Canadian border to a rugged section of the Los Padres National Forest near Santa Barbara.

Energy Connection

Critics attribute the administration's energy policies in the West to its long-held ties with the energy industry.

The president's father was a Texas oilman before entering politics, and the younger Bush started his own oil and gas company after college.

Before running for office in 2000, Cheney was chairman of Halliburton, one of the country's largest energy services firms.

With two energy veterans topping the ticket, the oil and gas industry gives more than 80% of its campaign contributions to Republican candidates, up from 63% in 1994.

The industry has given about \$140 million to federal campaigns of all candidates and committees during that period, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group. About 50 of the Bush campaign's premier fundraisers — nearly 10% — are energy executives. Each has raised \$100,000 or more.

Upon assuming office, Bush appointed several senior officials with oil and gas industry connections who moved quickly to boost production.

Norton, a former Interior Department associate solicitor and Colorado state attorney general, was heavily supported by energy interests during an unsuccessful 1996 Colorado Senate bid. She had previously worked for the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a conservative think tank that opposed wilderness protections and pushed to make public land more accessible for commercial development.

Deputy Interior Secretary J. Steven Griles is a former lobbyist for coal, oil and gas interests, including companies seeking greater access to Western energy deposits.

As a lawyer in Montana, Assistant Interior Secretary Rebecca W. Watson represented natural gas interests, among other clients, before joining the department. She said she also represented ranchers in cases against energy companies.

In addition, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, a close Bush friend and his chief campaign fundraiser in 2000, is a former energy company executive.

The thrust to open Western lands for oil and gas began with the national energy policy group convened by Cheney. After meeting with industry representatives in 2001, the Cabinet-level group called for a streamlined review of federal "land status and ... impediments to federal oil and gas leasing," and for changes "where opportunities exist" to promote energy development. It added that such changes should be consistent with "good environmental practice."

The White House wrote to Cabinet officers asking them to "identify ways your agency could expedite the review of permits or other authorizations for energy-related projects" and "accelerate the completion of such projects," according to a memo obtained by the Natural Resources Defense Council through the Freedom of Information Act.

The instructions, in turn, were reinforced by the BLM. An agency directive ordered field offices "to take the necessary steps to work with local oil and gas operators" and other agencies to speed

the processing of drilling applications.

In Wyoming, the state director gave an award to the Buffalo field office in 2002 for approving more drilling permits than all other BLM offices combined. The citation praised the local office for working "diligently" and "creatively" with industry to set the record.

Conversely, on Jan. 4, 2002, a Utah BLM official distributed a report critical of delays in approving drilling permits in the state.

"The leasing delays and [drilling approval] backlogs are created by the people responsible for performing the wilderness reviews" and environmental assessments, the report said. "Utah needs to ensure that existing staff understand that when an oil and gas lease parcel or when an application for permission to drill come in the door, that this work is their number-one priority."

A BLM spokeswoman said the memo was an "information bulletin" for the oil and gas team and not a directive.

However, some BLM staffers said environmental reviews suffered in the push to process drilling.

"All we do is issue permits for oil and gas," said a career BLM staff member in a Western office who spoke on the condition that he not be named. "We're told to follow new deadlines that are totally driven by industry. We're not given time to do adequate [environmental reviews] and to consider the consequences of our decisions."

Mat Millenbach, a longtime BLM employee and former state director in Montana who left in 2002, said he became concerned when the Bush administration began referring to wildlife protections as "impediments" to leasing.

"Those restrictions were coined as a way to enact multiple use of public land — to preserve wildlife while allowing oil and gas development. It was never intended as an impediment," Millenbach said. "It was intended to allow development while preserving another important resource, wildlife."

BLM officials said the agency was not cutting corners on environmental reviews, or granting waivers to protections that would harm wildlife. A spokesman said the agency still had long delays in approving drilling permits, in part because it was committed to doing complete assessments.

Several officials told of receiving calls from the White House if they took too long. The calls came from the Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining that was formed in 2001.

Its purpose is to act "like an ombudsman" mainly for companies frustrated with the slow pace of the bureaucracy, according to James Connaughton, head of the White House Council on

Environmental Quality, who talked about the task force in a recent interview.

The task force has also met numerous times with environmental groups, he said, and has made calls to speed other energy projects such as transmission lines and a wind energy initiative. But most of the task force's efforts are aimed at oil and gas development.

Connaughton said that, while the task force most often represented the energy industry, it did not apply pressure on the BLM or other federal agencies.

He said that when the task force called a land management agency, the purpose was to obtain information in response to complaints and to encourage agency coordination and efficiency.

"We bill ourselves as outcome neutral," said Robert W. Middleton, the task force director.

But White House documents show dozens of cases in which the task force was contacted by oil and gas companies with specific complaints. Each time, Middleton or other members responded by asking Interior officials about the corporate concerns, requesting "an expedited response" and often making telephone calls requesting greater efficiency, records show.

After Middleton called in 2003 on behalf of one of the nation's largest energy companies, El Paso Corp., local Forest Service employees said they felt pressured to act.

El Paso officials had contacted Middleton's office after the Forest Service rejected their bid to probe for natural gas in New Mexico's Valle Vidal, a complex of mountain meadows teeming with wildlife that for years has served as a retreat for the adjacent Philmont Scout Ranch, the nation's largest Boy Scout training center.

This month, the Forest Service took the first steps toward approving El Paso's bid to explore for gas on 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal.

Wayne Thornton, who helps oversee oil and gas leasing for the Forest Service's Southwest region, said there was no pressure from Washington to reverse protections that had been in place for 22 years.

But two employees of the Forest Service office in charge of the project, including its public affairs officer, Benjamin Romero, said they believed the task force leaned on the Forest Service to alter its stand on the Valle Vidal at El Paso's behest.

For some BLM field employees, getting a call from the White House has conveyed a powerful message.

A BLM archeologist said he was so stunned to hear from a White House official that he thought the call was a gag. "You guys must have the thing in Iraq ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) taken care of if you

have time to call somebody in a field office about a gas well," he initially responded.

But the caller said he was with the White House task force and asked about a pending application for a permit to drill. The archeologist paid attention.

"I know it's political. I know it's hot. It becomes a top priority because you don't want the bosses to jump down your throat," said the archeologist, speaking on the condition that he not be named. "I've worked for the federal government since the Reagan administration, and that's never happened before."

Experts on executive branch management said the creation of a White House advocate for a particular industry was unusual.

"Ombudsman offices have been set up at IRS and other agencies, but their role is to advocate broadly for citizens," said Paul Light, an expert on the executive branch at New York University. "I have never heard of an ombudsman created for just one industry, much less one set up in the White House."

Meanwhile, funding for the BLM's program that administers oil and gas exploration and development activities on public land has jumped 50% since the Bush administration took office.

In contrast, funding for wilderness management has increased only marginally, the budget for threatened and endangered species has grown 16% and funding for wildlife management has declined. Congress directed some of the additional funds to the oil and gas program to reduce the backlog of drilling applications.

The top-down pressure and bigger budget have produced results as industry is seeking drilling permits to capitalize on high energy prices. The BLM approved 4,421 permits to drill for gas and oil on federal land as of Aug. 4, topping last year's record high of 3,802. BLM officials say the total for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30 will exceed 6,000. While drilling permits have increased dramatically, Interior officials point out that the BLM has approved 25% fewer leases per year on average than the Clinton administration. On the other hand, the agency is opening up more land per lease than it did under Clinton.

The amount of federal land under lease to oil and gas companies was over 38 million acres as of June and could rise substantially in the next few years. The administration is revising about 70 resource management plans, which are long-term blueprints for commercial, recreational and conservation use of public land. Some of the draft plans propose to open up more gas and oil development in sensitive areas, including Otero Mesa and the Jack Morrow Hills.

BLM officials said their proposed plans would limit the amount of oil and gas activity in those areas at times that would do the most harm to wildlife. And they say they are pushing energy companies to use new technologies to reduce environmental damage.

"This administration is committed to restoring balance to the multiple-use mandate, which means that oil and gas development has a place at the table," said Clarke, the BLM's director. She said the mandate covered all lands not formally protected as wilderness.

West's New Terrain

In the 2000 election, Bush carried every Rocky Mountain state except New Mexico. His views are shared by many residents of the West who resented the efforts of past administrations to put federal lands off limits not just to the energy industry but to chain saws and pickups.

But the West is changing.

In January, 100 Western economists wrote to Bush and Western governors warning against heavy reliance on extractive industries, including oil and gas drilling.

"Extractive industries and agriculture now play a smaller economic role because their ability to generate new jobs and higher incomes has declined," the economists wrote. "Across most of the West, a community's ability to retain and attract firms now drives its prosperity. But if a community's natural environment is degraded, it has greater difficulty retaining and attracting workers and firms."

While Wyoming officials can point to the state's billion-dollar-plus surplus, largely due to oil and gas industry royalty payments, Gov. Dave Freudenthal, a Democrat, has expressed reservations about proposals to drill for oil and gas along the pronghorn antelope migration route south through Pinedale and toward the Jack Morrow Hills.

In Wyoming, wildlife-related activities account for \$500 million, more than any other income source except oil and gas.

Norton, Clarke and other senior administration officials have crisscrossed the country to meet with hunters, fishermen and ranchers.

Watson, the assistant Interior secretary, touted a series of initiatives intended to protect wildlife at a recent summit of hunting and outdoor groups in upstate New York. Robert Model, the coalition's chairman and president of the Boone and Crockett Club, founded by Theodore Roosevelt and one of the country's oldest hunting and conservation organizations, said afterward that the administration was "responding by making important moves toward addressing and mitigating the concerns of our community."

Bush has spoken at several events to the self-described "hook and bullet crowd." He appeared on a TV fishing show this month, did an interview with Field and Stream magazine and announced an expanded national wetlands program from a farm in Minnesota with the head of a hunting group.

Some Westerners remain more impressed with the effects they see on the land than with the administration's outreach.

"I can't understand all the rapid expansion of drilling and more drilling everywhere," said Courtney Skinner, 68, a lifelong Republican and former Bush voter who leads expeditions into the mountains of western Wyoming. "I think it's going to cost the West a terrible price — not only in our water, our air, our way of life. It's going to cost us the freedom that the West stands for."

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Battling over the nature of the West

Lying beneath some of the most scenic areas of the Rocky Mountains are vast pools of oil and natural gas. Higher energy prices and administration policies have rekindled conflicts between wilderness advocates and those who want greater access to energy resources. Here's a look at key areas of contention in five Western states.

MONTANA

Badger-Two Medicine: The area includes sacred ground for the Blackfoot Indians. Drilling leases were issued in the 1980s.

Rocky Mountain Front: Home to grizzly bears, wolves and elk, it is one of the wildest and most majestic stretches of the Rocky Mountains. At least three energy companies have expressed interest in drilling for oil and gas there.

WYOMING

Jack Morrow Hills: It features badlands, petroglyphs and a portion of the largest sand dune system in North America. A federal government plan could lead to more than 1,000 wells.

COLORADO

Vermillion Basin: An estimated 80% of it is roadless red rock desert badlands. It is also the site of 1,000-year-old petroglyphs. There are about 5,000 acres covered by oil and gas leases, and an energy company is seeking to lease roughly 7,000 acres more.

Roan Plateau: Peregrine falcons, bald eagles and other wildlife live on the plateau, which sits atop a huge natural gas field.

HD Mountains, San Juan National Forest: Elk, mountain lions and other wildlife inhabit the area, which is beloved by big-game hunters. Federal officials are considering allowing nearly 500

natural gas wells.

UTAH

Book Cliffs/Desolation Canyon/Fisher Towers: The region includes a 250-mile-long band of high cliffs, along with ancient burial grounds and rock art.

Canyonlands Basin: Spectacular red rock scenery lies next to Canyonlands National Park. Federal officials have approved plans to explore for oil nearby.

NEW MEXICO

Valle Vidal: The Forest Service recently reversed prior refusals to allow gas exploration in the Carson National Forest portion of Valle Vidal. It took initial steps to OK an El Paso Corp. plan to look for fuel deposits over 40,000 acres and drill as many as 500 wells.

Otero Mesa: In this Chihuahuan desert grassland area, the BLM has proposed opening a part of 1.2 million acres to drilling. The state government opposes the plan, favoring protection for much of the area.

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Presidential protection

The most acreage passed by Congress under the Wilderness Act was set aside during the Johnson, Carter, Reagan and Clinton administrations.

Years	President	Acreage
'63-'69	Johnson	9,932,471
'69-'74	Nixon	1,274,569
'74-'77	Ford	3,470,407
'77-'81	Carter	66,256,220
'81-'89	Reagan	10,622,143
'89-'93	Bush	3,937,695
'93-'01	Clinton	9,455,470
'01-present	Bush	529,604

Sources: U.S. Geological Survey ([news - web sites](#)), National Park Service, Natural Resources Defense Council, Trout Unlimited, Bureau of Land Management, Census Bureau ([news - web](#)

[sites](#)), ESRI, Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Wilderness.net

Graphics reporting by Julie Sheer and Cheryl Brownstein-Santiago

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The policymakers

Upon assuming office, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, both former oilmen, appointed numerous senior officials with oil and gas industry connections.

Don Evans

Commerce secretary

President Bush's close Texas friend and chief fundraiser in the 2000 campaign, Evans is a former oil and gas executive.

Gale A. Norton

Interior secretary

A former Interior Department solicitor and Colorado attorney general, Norton was heavily supported by energy interests during her unsuccessful 1996 Colorado Senate bid.

J. Steven Griles

Deputy Interior secretary

Griles is a former lobbyist for coal and natural gas interests, including several companies seeking greater access to Western energy deposits.

Rebecca W. Watson

Assistant secretary for land

and minerals management

Watson has energy connections as well. As a lawyer in Montana, she represented oil and a natural gas company as well as ranchers who were at odds with energy firms.

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Miller and Hamburger reported from Washington and Cart from Los Angeles. Staff writers Henry Weinstein in Utah and Kathleen Hennessey in Washington contributed to this report. Researchers Robin Cochran and Janet Lundblad also contributed.