Small and Temporary—Assessing the Impact of 100 Years of Oil and Natural Gas Development in Western Colorado

A study examining the impacts of oil and natural gas development and efforts to protect some of Western Colorado’s most special landscapes.

Oil and natural gas development has a small and temporary impact that is compatible with a wide variety of other natural resource values, including the conservation of wild and scenic places. If you don’t believe us, just ask Representative Dianna DeGette of Colorado. She recently introduced Colorado’s Wilderness Act of 2007 (H.R. 3756); a Bill that includes many areas leased for oil and natural gas development that also contain pipelines, roads, and plugged and abandoned wells.

Ironically, one of the stated purposes of DeGette’s legislation is to curtail the damaging effects of energy development. So the question arises: if energy development is as irreversibly destructive as some would claim, how would areas once developed for oil and natural gas ever qualify as ‘pristine’, much less be considered Wilderness? Isn’t it intellectually dishonest to say that oil and gas causes irreparable damage to the environment while in the next breath claim that areas with prior development are so pristine that they should be designated as Wilderness by Congress?

Sadly, the public has been misled to believe that we are faced with a choice: sacrifice lands for oil and gas development or preserve them and put them off limits forever by designating them as Wilderness. In fact, just the opposite is true. We can have the energy we need while also protecting areas we love. You won’t find many people who are opposed to notion of creating new Wilderness areas, but designating 1.65 million acres of Colorado as Wilderness, 15% of which is Federal land, to curtail the impacts of development is clearly a Red Herring.

A number of Colorado’s Western Slope Counties (Garfield, Rio Blanco, and Mesa) have significant current and prior oil and gas operations and still enjoy the numerous other benefits of multiple-use activities on federal land. The presence of plugged and abandoned wells in several of the proposed areas means that even with energy development, Colorado’s special places will remain special.
Energy development is just as much a part of this rural area’s rich history as recreation, agriculture, ranching and other activities. Oil and gas development began on the Western Slope in 1902 as wildcatters sought to develop the rich resource potential of the Piceance Creek area. Through the years, Colorado’s oil patch has contributed incalculably to the economic well-being of the state and to the nation’s growth and progress as a world power.

Independent energy businesses have been exploring and producing the resources of the Piceance Basin for more than 100 years, and the fact that these areas continue to be proposed for formal Wilderness designation provides further evidence that even without modern reclamation practices, nature quickly restores itself.

Resource extraction is performed where the resource can be found, not where it is convenient to drill. Nevertheless, should energy resources lie below sensitive areas, industry takes the utmost care in mitigating wildlife habitat and reclaiming the surface to its natural state and complies with the most stringent environmental controls in the world.

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<th>Oil and Gas Activity within Selected Citizen’s Proposed Wilderness Areas</th>
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Quick Facts

Small, independent operators have drilled several wells within the Big Ridge proposed area. Many of these wells were plugged as recently as 2003 and have already reclaimed to their natural state.

Nearby Rangely Field, with its first well drilled in 1902, is one of Colorado’s most historic and prolific oil fields. Because early Rangely operators found the formation difficult to penetrate with conventional drill bits, diamond drill bits were used, marking the first time diamond bits were used to drill for petroleum.

Previous & Ongoing Oil and Gas Development

- Plugged & Abandoned Wells: 12
- Producing Wells: 8
- Leases: 24,500 acres (98% of area)
Plugged & Abandoned Well within Big Ridge Proposed Wilderness Area:
Philadelphia Creek #8

Well Name/No: Philadelphia Creek #8
Lat/Long: 39.909589/-108.73424
Operator: Bayless Producer LLC
Wellbore Completion Date: 3/27/1977
Plugged and Abandoned: 9/12/2003
**Quick Facts**

Small, independent operators have drilled several wells within the Hunter Canyon proposed area, with varying levels of success. Energy development has been ongoing in the area for years, and some wells (like the one above) were plugged over 30 years ago.

The BLM has placed the area’s canyons and steep slopes off-limits to surface occupancy for energy exploration, and has developed protective stipulations for much of the rest of the area. These stipulations are to protect visual resources and back-country uses on highly unstable slopes and cover almost 11,000 acres in the western portion of the area.

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**Previous & Ongoing Oil and Gas Development**

- **Plugged & Abandoned Wells:** 6
- **Producing Wells:** 6
- **Leases:** ~30,000 acres (~94% of area)
Well Name/No: Federal Coal Gulch #1-10
Lat/Long: 39.370297/-108.656902
Operator: Fuel Resources Development Co.
Wellbore Completion Date: Unknown
Plugged and Abandoned: 5/22/1975
Plugged & Abandoned Well within Hunter Canyon Proposed Wilderness Area:

Pure Oil Co. Gov #1

Well Name/No: Pure Oil Co. Gov #1
Lat/Long: 39.390396/-108.714484
Operator: Broadhead, Walter D.
Wellbore Completion Date: 5/20/1960
Plugged and Abandoned: Unknown
Quick Facts

Most wells in and around the Prairie Canyon proposed area are drilled by small, independent operators, whose names you’ve probably never heard of.

Nevertheless, these independent producers, who typically have about 12 employees, adhere to stringent reclamation standards. Thus, even with ongoing energy development, unique ecosystems like Prairie Canyon stay unique.

Previous & Ongoing Oil and Gas Development

- Plugged & Abandoned Wells: 12
- Producing Wells: 7
- Leases: ~10,000 acres (~55% of area)

Source: BLM
Well Name/No: Federal #5-2
Lat/Long: 39.485343/-109.008754
Operator: Tom Brown Inc.
Wellbore Completion Date: Unknown
Plugged and Abandoned: 9/10/1997

Plugged & Abandoned Well within Prairie Canyon Proposed Wilderness Area:
Federal Well #5-2
Quick Facts

Energy development in the Piceance Basin is just a part of the area's history as other land uses.

Exploration and production in and around the Oil Spring Mountain proposed area began in 1943, when Continental Oil Co., now Conoco-Phillips, began to develop the Dragon Tail natural gas play.

Previous & Ongoing Oil and Gas Development

- Plugged & Abandoned Wells: 13
- Producing Wells: 6
- Leases: 10,030 acres (40% of area)
Plugged & Abandoned Well within Oil Spring Mountain Proposed Wilderness Area:
USA Texas Creek # 4-X

Well Name/No: USA Texas Creek # 4-X  
Lat/Long: 39.796249/-108.949895  
Operator: Northwest Exploration Co.  
Wellbore Completion Date: 11/3/1983  
Plugged and Abandoned: Unknown  

Source: BLM
Quick Facts

The South Shale Ridge proposed area, near DeBeque, has had natural gas development occurring within its borders since the 1930s.

Many wells within the area were plugged and abandoned before modern-day reclamation standards, yet have still returned to their natural state.

South Shale Ridge is home to several multiple uses, including grazing, tourism, energy development, ranching, and agriculture.

Previous & Ongoing Oil and Gas Development

- Plugged & Abandoned Wells: 14
- Producing Wells: 7
- Leases: 27,569 acres (100% of area)

Source: BLM
Plugged & Abandoned Well within South Shale Ridge Proposed Wilderness Area:
Federal C #27-4

Well Name/No: Federal C #27-4
Lat/Long: 39.325199/-108.315571
Operator: Teton Energy Co.
Wellbore Completion Date: 9/20/1983
Plugged and Abandoned: Unknown
Plugged & Abandoned Well within South Shale Ridge Proposed Wilderness Area:
Federal Well #1-34

Well Name/No: Federal #1-34
Lat/Long: 39.318869/-108.309511
Operator: Piute Energy Co.
Wellbore Completion Date: 7/26/1978
Plugged and Abandoned: 10/21/1984