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HEADLINE: White House Intercedes for Gas Project in National Forest

BYLINE: Julie Cart, Times Staff Writer  
DATELINE: CARSON NATIONAL FOREST, N.M.

Overriding the opposition of the U.S. Forest Service and New Mexico state officials, a White House energy task force has interceded on behalf of Houston-based El Paso Corp. in its two-year effort to explore for natural gas in a remote part of a national forest next door to America's largest Boy Scout camp.

Forest Service officials discouraged efforts to drill in the Valle Vidal at least three times since the agency acquired the land in 1982, citing concerns about water pollution, wildlife and recreation if a large-scale energy project were approved.

But last week, the agency took the first step toward approving the giant energy company's proposal to tap into 40,000 acres of alpine meadows in the Carson National Forest. The agency released a report that forecast a high probability of recovering gas from the area and laid out a scenario in which 500 wells could be drilled on the forest's east side.

The Forest Service's action has sparked angry opposition from many groups and officials, including New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat who was U.S. secretary of Energy during the Clinton administration. Such disputes are increasingly commonplace in Rocky Mountain states as critics of Bush administration energy policies accuse the White House of repeatedly targeting some of the most cherished wild places for development.

Home to 200 species of birds and 60 types of mammals, including one of the state's largest elk herds, the "Valley of Life," as it was named by Latino pioneers, has been a proving ground for generations of young men and women in a wilderness training program run by the Boy Scouts of America.

Since 1938, the Boy Scouts have operated a national training center on the 200-square-mile Philmont Ranch southeast of the Valle Vidal. Each year some 25,000 young people converge on the ranch for a host of outdoor activities. But when the Forest Service, in consultation with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, rejected El Paso Corp.'s request in 2002, the company appealed to the administration.

"In this environment, we need new natural gas supplies more than ever", wrote El Paso's federal government affairs director to Robert W. Middleton, the director of the White House Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining. "We believe that the Valle Vidal Unit could be a vital new source of such supply. Consequently, we would very much appreciate anything you could do to help move this process forward in a timely manner."

Copies of correspondence made available to The Times show that after El Paso representatives met with Middleton, he instructed the Forest Service to revisit the project.

David Seesholtz, a forest planner working on the Valle Vidal project, said there was no pressure from Washington to reverse past policy, and he said the initial steps taken last week by the Forest Service did not necessarily mean the agency would allow energy exploration.

No one on the task force, including Middleton, was available to be interviewed. But, speaking on behalf of the task force, Dana Perino, of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said there was nothing inappropriate about Middleton's memo to the Forest Service.

The task force was established by executive order in 2001 to help Boost oil and gas production on public lands. Although the Valle Vidal had not been opened to exploration, Perino said the task force did not Overstep its authority or exert undue pressure on the Forest Service when it responded to El Paso's request for assistance.

According to Forest Service staffers at the agency's Taos office, the task force began making calls almost every week, beginning in 2003, to inquire about the progress of the Valle Vidal project.

"The task force came down through the channels. The change was based on "Let's see what we can do for El Paso Energy," said Benjamin Romero, public affairs officer for Carson National Forest.

"The overall thought was they are forcing us into expediting it," said another staffer, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Joanna Prokup, New Mexico's secretary of energy, minerals and natural

resources, said the task force's message to the Forest Service left little room for interpretation. "El Paso called [Washington] D.C., D.C. called the Forest Service. They've put it on the fast track."

Prokup, whose agency oversees oil and gas operations in the state, opposes any drilling in the Valle Vidal, "both personally and professionally," she said.

At an anti-drilling rally two weeks ago, Richardson described the Valle Vidal as a precious place that should be left as it is, a view shared by state game and fish officials, hunting and fishing groups, Conservation organizations and local ranchers -- some of whom trace their ancestry to 18th and 19th century Spanish and Mexican pioneers who settled much of northern New Mexico. About 47% of the population in surrounding Colfax County is Latino.

An energy project can transform undeveloped countryside into an Industrial landscape of roads, power lines, pipelines, wells, generators, compressors and waste-water ponds.

Although Philmont officials have not commented publicly on the prospect of energy exploration next to the Scout ranch, many former campers and staff members have expressed opposition and about 300 have signed an online petition opposing it.

"There is a lot of outrage among the staff," said Justin Berger, a former camper and Philmont staff member who for three summers led Scouts on 12-day wilderness trips into the Valle Vidal. If the project goes ahead, it would occur "precisely where we maintain our camps," said Berger, who now lives in Maine. "I would fully expect that we would shut our camps down."

On Thursday, Kim Wallace, an El Paso spokeswoman, said the company had not yet decided what course it would take. "At this point, El Paso has not decided if it has an interest in leasing this acreage should it be open to lease," she said.

A global energy company founded in 1928, El Paso has the largest Network of natural gas pipelines in the United States. Over the last five years, the company has contributed \$2.3 million to Republican candidates and political action committees.

The controversy over natural gas exploration in the Valle Vidal marks the second time in recent months that such a proposal has sparked broad bipartisan opposition in New Mexico, the nation's second-largest onshore producer of natural gas.

Taxes and royalties from the energy industry make up by far the

largest portion of the state's \$12-billion permanent fund, which is used primarily to finance education.

A plan by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to allow gas drilling on Otero Mesa in southeast New Mexico provoked equally intense opposition and prompted the governor to say that energy exploration should be prohibited in places where the environment could be harmed.

The Valle Vidal joins a growing list of Western locations where the Bush administration's aggressive support for energy production has triggered opposition not only from environmentalists, but from farmers, ranchers and others worried about the effects on pastureland, water quality, wildlife and scenery.

Similar disputes in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Utah pit the importance of energy supplies against the value of other resources that attract tourists and new residents and generate income from hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing.

The Valle Vidal is an oasis of wild country within the much larger Raton Basin, where more than 6 million acres are being explored or drilled for natural gas. El Paso already operates just outside the Valle Vidal, in the 600,000-acre Vermejo Park Ranch, owned by media tycoon Ted Turner. The energy company had acquired the right to drill the land before Turner, a noted conservationist, bought it in 1996.

Encompassing about 100,000 acres, the Valle Vidal was donated to the Forest Service in 1982 by Pennzoil Corp. Pennzoil requested that the land be managed for the benefit of wildlife and recreation.

Ranging in elevation from 7,700 to 12,584 feet, the Valle Vidal's high meadows abut the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the southern Rocky Mountains. Elk, deer, black bears, mountain lions and bobcats inhabit the area, and the Valle Vidal's streams are home to Rio Grande cutthroat trout, prized by anglers.

Last week, Joe Torres, president of the Valle Vidal Grazing Assn., talked about what the valley meant to him and his family, who have been tending cattle there for more than 100 years. Torres, 76, said he's been hunting, fishing, camping and horseback riding in the Valle Vidal all his life.

"We can't harass the wildlife in any way," he said. "They were here first. If that means no drilling, we don't drill. It's that simple. I think the people of the United States have a vested interest here."

Berger, the former Philmont Ranch staffer, described the Valle Vidal as a vivid outdoor classroom. He said that at a certain point on each backpacking trip, group leaders teach campers the Wilderness Pledge.

"We tell them, 'With a right comes a responsibility.' With the right to use the land comes a responsibility to protect it."

GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC: MAP: Proposed drilling, New Mexico CREDIT: Los Angeles Times PHOTO: FOE: Joe Torres, 76, president of the Valle Vidal Grazing Assn., is strongly opposed to any effort to explore for natural gas in the area.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Chas Wemple For The Times PHOTO: IN USE: Trucks roll across Vermejo Park Ranch, just outside the Valle Vidal. El Paso Corp. had acquired drilling rights to the land before mogul Ted Turner, a noted conservationist, bought it in 1996.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Chas Wemple For The Times