



Fears about drilling may tilt vote in New Mexico

By Bill Lambrecht

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CARSON NATIONAL FOREST, N.M. - Mary Reed has been a reliable Republican voter through the years as she managed the campgrounds in the Valle Vidal, a mountainous, elk-filled wilderness in northern New Mexico.

But with the Bush administration promoting oil and gas drilling on the federally owned land, Reed's political allegiance may change.

"We're not going to have campgrounds, because people are not going to want to come here from Missouri, Oklahoma and Minnesota for relaxation and listen to noisy equipment all night long," said Reed, 66, a private concessionaire.

At 8,000 feet up in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, recent maneuvering by the industry-friendly White House has provoked a furor that could have a bearing on the presidential election in the battleground state of New Mexico.

Valle Vidal ("Valley of Life") is among several prominent environmental conflicts in Western battleground states where Bush and his Democratic challenger, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, propose starkly different land-use policies.

Al Gore eked out a 366-vote victory four years ago in this state. Now, voters are being asked to weigh the harm from new gas drilling against placing limits on an energy industry that generates thousands of jobs and pays more than \$1 billion annually in state taxes.

The drilling issue took on new urgency recently amid the Ponderosa pines and alpine meadows of Carson National Forest's Valle Vidal. The national forest is also the annual training ground for boys from the famous Philmont Ranch, the nation's largest Boy Scout camp.

After a White House energy task force interceded on behalf of El Paso Corp., the U.S. Forest Service took an initial step toward letting the Houston-based energy company drill on 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal.

The Forest Service, a unit of the Agriculture Department, had steadfastly discouraged drilling because of threats to the landscape, the roaming elk herds and other the mammals and 200 bird species in the federal preserve.

But pressured by the White House Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining, the Forest Service published a report in August spelling out the potential bounty of sinking 5,000 wells to extract coalbed methane gas on the Valle Vidal's sloping east side.

The drilling in Valle Vidal could be years away - and might never happen if further studies consider it too intrusive. But judging by White House persistence, the drills might bite sooner rather than later.

Documents were obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by a local environmental group, Amigos Bravos, and made available to the Post-Dispatch. Those documents reflect El Paso's designs on the public lands and the White House efforts to expedite Forest Service studies required for the drilling.

In a letter last year to the White House, El Paso said it believes the Valle Vidal "is rich with natural gas" and offered to pay for the government's environmental study.

Calling weekly

The Los Angeles Times quoted unidentified Forest Service officials in August as saying the White House was calling them almost weekly about the Valle Vidal drilling.

In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management wants to allow gas drilling on the Otero Mesa, fragile lands in southeastern New Mexico. The state of New Mexico has raised questions about that plan and firmly opposes opening up the Valle Vidal to leases.

Kerry, campaigning in New Mexico last week, referred to "sensitive wildlife habitats" that need protection and to threats from opening up "your back yard to big oil and gas drillers."

Nonetheless, it was unclear in a state so dependent on oil and gas revenues how much of an advantage, if any, the drilling controversies offer for the Kerry forces.

In an interview, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat and the nation's energy secretary in the Clinton administration, pointed to threats to the Valle Vidal's "major ecosystem" as his reason for opposing exploration there.

Richardson contended that the drilling controversies in his state could stimulate turnout of environmentalists and outdoors-minded New Mexicans on Kerry's behalf.

But Danny Diaz, the Bush-Cheney campaign's spokesman in the Southwest, argued that Kerry is out of step with mainstream thinking in a state that looks favorably on the energy industry.

"President Bush understands Western values because he is a Westerner. And John Kerry stands with the radical-left environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters," he said.

Bob Gallagher, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said it is too early to know when - or if - drilling will begin in the Valle Vidal.

But Gallagher asserted that his industry can explore for natural gas and produce it in an environmentally sound way. And he emphasized the value of an industry that provides 23,000 jobs in New Mexico and provides energy to its neighbors.

"In 1970, when we were all lined up in gas lines, we were 30 percent dependent on imported oil. Today, we're 60 percent dependent," he said, repeating the common argument for more domestic production.

Environmental "transition"

The pro-industry maneuvering in New Mexico is the latest example of the Bush administration's aggressive pursuit of domestic energy sources.

Both in word and deed, the president has insisted that the nation must pursue every opportunity to develop oil and gas so as to reduce dependency on foreign imports.

Much like his bold foreign policy initiatives, Bush's approach to public lands in the West is nothing short of transformational. He is intent on changing the federal policy that puts about 12 percent of federal lands off limits, changes that would enable exploration wherever oil and gas might be found, including Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and public lands in the Rocky Mountain West.

The president spelled out his thinking in the October edition of Field & Stream magazine, after inviting the outdoor magazine's editor to his Texas ranch.

"We are in a transition period between how we have used resources in the past and how we are going to use them in the future," Bush said. "There are some who say no drilling at all. And that's a very difficult position for me to take, given my job as the leader of the country to try to promote in environmentally sensitive ways enough energy so that our country can continue to move forward."

Kerry offered a contrasting view, telling the magazine, "You've got to have an ethic that says you're not going to drill everywhere, you're not going to drill in preserves, national monuments. You're going to preserve national parks, you're going to preserve national forests and so forth."

The administration has generally maintained its resolve with regard to drilling, logging and relaxing roadless rules in a way that gives governors the authority to open preserved lands for development.

Political heat

But this month, feeling political heat from hunters, ranchers and conservationists, the administration pulled the plug on federal studies aimed at drilling in a pristine area of northwest Montana where the Great Northern Plains meet the Rocky Mountains.

Declaring that some areas should be off-limits to drilling - seemingly contradicting the president's assertions - the Interior Department halted an environmental impact statement pursued by a Canadian company pushing to drill for coalbed methane gas.

The company planned the same search for coalbed methane gas proposed for northern New Mexico, a plan that has riled conservationists, ranchers and equestrian enthusiasts.

The recent technology enables extraction of natural gas from the cracks of coal seams deep underground. Besides new roads, pipelines and transmission corridors to support the wells, skeptics worry about the pollution from millions of gallons of water pumped from the coal deposits in the process of retrieving the gas.

Oscar Simpson, a Republican and former Bush supporter who heads the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, believes that the Valle Vidal's elk herds could disappear from an "industrial zone" of mining.

"It's very simple. Wildlife is not compatible with a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, high-density, high-noise operation," said Simpson, formerly New Mexico's chief regulator of the oil and gas industry.

Joe Torres, president of the Valle Vidal Grazing Association, said that his members uniformly oppose drilling.

"I am not against drilling; I am against drilling in the wrong places. You can't turn these companies loose up here because they don't give a damn," he said while rounding up cattle last week.

Yet many in northern New Mexico are unsure how to respond to the recent drilling news.

Just after bagging a trophy bull elk last week in the Valle Vidal, Mike Albers worried that the gas drilling would diminish the quality of future hunts - if he is fortunate enough again to get one of the licenses distributed by lottery.

But Albers, 41, a federal investigator, said that despite his disappointment with the administration, he is leaning toward supporting the president Nov. 2.

"I know Bush is behind all this, but I'm not so sure Kerry wouldn't be doing it, too. And there are other issues to think about," he said.

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Battleground: New Mexico

Population: 1.8 million

Electoral votes: 5

2000 winner: Al Gore, by 366 votes.

Issues: Oil and gas drilling has emerged as an 11th hour issue amid White House-backed efforts to explore for energy in protected areas. In heavy new registration, 57 percent are under 35 and 10,000 of the newly signed-up are American Indians. Vote will be closely monitored after ragged tabulation in 2000, when a vote scanner was misprogrammed, totals were misread and votes were temporarily lost in a warehouse.

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