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Comment sought on Valle Vidal plan silent on gas drilling

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It's bereft of references about oil and gas development in the Valle Vidal, but it waxes eloquent about wildlife, watershed and "viewshed" health.

The long-awaited proposed Valle Vidal amendment to the Carson National Forest management plan, released June 14, suggests special protection for Little Costilla Peak and outlines how forest officials prefer the 101,794-acre Valle Vidal to be managed — and they're seeking public comment.

The proposal calls for the creation of the "Upper Poñil Botanical Area," protecting 4,083 acres around Little Costilla Peak as a sanctuary for rare bristlecone pine trees and the headwaters of Middle Poñil Creek. The proposed plan also regulates camping, equestrian use, the quality of scenery, Río Grande cutthroat trout and fire use in the Valle Vidal.

But despite saying little about coalbed methane development, the proposed amendment will help forest officials make their decision about drilling the eastern Valle Vidal.

After Pennzoil Corporation donated the Valle Vidal to the Forest Service in 1982, forest officials did not include the area in the Carson's management plan, written in 1986. Since then, the forest has had no specific regulations for how the Valle Vidal's resources are to be governed.

The management plan for the entire Carson National Forest will be updated in 2007, but the Forest Service decided last year to write a plan for the Valle Vidal to attach to the 1986 forest plan because "we didn't want that to be the dominant issue during revision" in 2007, said Carson Forest Planner David Seesholtz. "We've seen how emotional they (the public) can get about the management of the Valle Vidal."

Once the Valle Vidal amendment is approved, it stands to be revised — or at least "revisited" — again as part of the 2007 forest plan revision, Seesholtz said.

In 2002, El Paso Corporation requested to lease the eastern 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal for coalbed methane extraction, and soon forest officials began drafting the proposed Valle Vidal amendment. The three-year decision-making process on drilling will be based on the management "vision" outlined in the amendment.

[Note – Map not available for download 06/24/2005 – W.M. Brown]

Map caption:

If approved, the proposed Upper Poñil Botanical Area will include Little Costilla Peak and ancient bristlecone pines along its eastern and southern flanks.

But the proposed forest plan amendment doesn't mention that, declaring in its "vision" for the area only that the "Valle Vidal is (to be) managed for multiple uses, focusing on the maintenance or restoration of diverse, resilient biological communities."

Deputy Forest Supervisor Kendall Clark said in December that the Valle Vidal amendment would include "a simple recognition of the presence and or absence of mineral resources." But, with the exception of declaring that "common variety minerals" cannot be extracted from or near Comanche Point, the proposed amendment says nothing about the presence of natural gas other than a statement saying, "Oil and gas development for the eastern portion of the Valle Vidal will be analyzed separate from this amendment."

That document, called a leasing analysis, will be prepared beginning next year analyzing the effects of gas drilling, eventually leading to a final decision on the issue in 2008.

The amendment also mentions that the leasing analysis is an example of other future analyses that may be done concerning other activities in the area.

Seesholtz said the proposed Valle Vidal amendment doesn't preclude any sort of development or other activities not mentioned in the document. The leasing analysis must be completed after the amendment so that forest officials can determine if natural gas drilling is compatible with the amendment's vision for the Valle Vidal.

If leases are granted, 190 to more than 500 gas wells could be drilled in Colfax County's half of the Valle Vidal.

New protections

Aside from outlining where and when people can camp, park and tether horses, the proposal demands that the scenery — called a "viewshed" — along Forest Roads 1950 and 1910 be partially preserved. The quality of the scenery in other parts of the Valle Vidal away from the roads will be allowed to degrade "to meet other resource goals on a case-by-case basis."

The proposal also includes the Forest Service's first mention of the Upper Poñil Botanical Area, a protected area that may include Little Costilla Peak, the ridge leading to its summit along the Taos/Colfax county line and the headwaters of Middle Poñil Creek, where rare, ancient bristlecone pines tower to above 70 feet. The land in the botanical area is not in the part of the Valle Vidal proposed for drilling.

But the land in the proposed botanical area wouldn't be left as-is. The Valle Vidal amendment calls for designated backcountry campsites, "education and interpretive services" and interpretive trails "to reduce impact on botanical resources." Camping would be restricted to the campsites.

Even though Seesholtz said there is currently little human impact to the area, the new trails, signs and campsites would concentrate the impact of the greater numbers of people that are expected to use the Valle Vidal.

New trails in the botanical area would likely follow old unmaintained trails that crisscross the area, he said.

Comment

The Valle Vidal amendment's release kicks off a 90-day public comment period on the proposal ending Sept. 15. The amendment is available online at www.fs.fed.us/r3/carson or at the Carson's headquarters in Taos.

Send written comments to Carson National Forest, ATTN: Valle Vidal Plan Amendment, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, N.M. 87571. Seesholtz will answer questions directly at 505-758-6210.