

Special Report: Drilling ignites battle over Western paradise

Accelerated drilling for natural gas and oil has produced a backlash by an unlikely alliance of diehard conservatives and left-leaning environmentalists.

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CIMARRON, N.M. - Near the entrance of a pristine national forest area called the Valle Vidal, or "valley of life," a Halliburton tanker truck rumbles past a huge crater among the sculpted sandstone cliffs, herds of elk and ponderosa pines.

It's a blasted circle, two acres wide, around a pit of foul-smelling water, a heap of shattered stone and a hissing 20-foot-tall pump sucking methane gas from the earth. The truck contains yet another shipment of liquid nitrogen, which will be injected into the ground at extreme pressure to crack more rock and release more gas.

This jarring intrusion of industry into wilderness is increasingly common on public lands across the West, evidence of the rising number of gas and oil drilling permits approved by the Bush administration. Six years ago, 1,639 such permits on federal land were approved. Last year, the administration granted more than three times that number, 6,052.

The accelerated drilling on public land is intended to meet rising demand for fuel, but it's also having unintended consequences. The drive to drill has inspired unusual political alliances between liberal environmentalists and conservative NRA members determined to preserve public hunting, hiking and ranching lands.

In New Mexico, an advocacy group called the Coalition for the Valle Vidal has fused Ralph Nader-voting "tree huggers," gun-toting elk hunters, cattlemen and teenagers passionate about saving the scenery beside the largest Boy Scout camp in the world, the adjacent Philmont Scout Ranch.

"Someone once said the only way the Israelis and the Palestinians are going to get together is if they were attacked by someone from outer space. Well, that's what's happened out West, where the oil and gas companies have attacked all of us, and so we have formed some unusual alliances," said Treciafaye "Tweeti" Blancett, a former Bush campaign coordinator from Aztec, N.M., who is now a director of a group called Republicans for Environmental Protection.

"It's happening all across the Rocky Mountain West - in New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming - we've formed coalitions with people we never would have talked to five years ago," Blancett said.

Her husband, Linn, a 60-year-old cowboy and diehard Republican, raised a Greenpeace banner in protest after being driven out of the cattle business by drillers who put more than 200 wells on the federal land his family had been ranching for six generations.

The Coalition for the Valle Vidal is facing some powerful opponents, including the Houston-based El Paso natural gas company and the White House, which has ordered an expedited federal response to the company's request to drill.

Administration officials say they have sped up the approval of drilling applications across the West because of soaring energy prices and a rising need for natural gas. Drilling for gas has been subsidized since the Carter administration because burning it produces less air pollution than coal or oil. As more power plants and homes have switched to natural gas over the past two decades, consumption has risen 40 percent.

"Both businesses and American families acutely feel the pinch of high energy costs," said Michael Waldron, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Energy. "What this administration is attempting to do, through its efforts to increase domestic production, is to ensure there is an affordable, reliable energy supply to meet America's growing energy need."

While much attention has focused on the high-profile battle over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the American public will be more directly affected by similar but less noticed proposals in the lower 48 states, such as those for hundreds of wells in the Valle Vidal, the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Red Desert and the Powder River Basin in Wyoming, in the San Juan National Forest in Colorado, and near the Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado.

Arguments over the environmental impact of drilling are also heating up in Congress. Republican Sen. James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma, chairman of the environment committee, and others are pushing legislation that exempts from the Safe Drinking Water Act drilling companies that inject liquid nitrogen, sand, diesel fluids and other compounds at high pressure into the earth to crack the rock and release natural gas.

Critics say this hydraulic fracturing taints water supplies in a region where water is scarce. But industry advocates say that studies have shown that fracturing is harmless and that excess regulation strangles the nation's economic health.

"We are not generally going to be drilling into drinking water supplies, and there is no real evidence that hydraulic fracturing has any effects on ground water," said Jeffrey Eshelman, director of public affairs for the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

State files suit

In New Mexico, Gov. Bill Richardson has rejected this argument. In April, his administration filed a lawsuit against the federal Bureau of Land Management to try to stop a plan that would allow drilling of oil and gas wells in a grassland called the Otera Mesa that sits on top of an important future water supply in the southern part of the state.

Elsewhere in the West, newly formed alliances of pickup drivers and Prius jockeys have won some skirmishes against the gas and oil industries.

Teamwork has gained indefinite delays in drilling proposals on the federally owned Roan Plateau in Colorado and a 250-mile stretch of the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. The state legislature in Wyoming passed a law this spring requiring cooperative land-use agreements between drilling companies and landowners affected by the industry.

The 167-square-mile Valle Vidal is located in the northern part of New Mexico about four hours from Albuquerque. Part of the Carson National Forest, it is visited every year by up to 50,000 fishermen, horseback riders, hunters and hikers, including about 3,000 Boy Scouts. Scouts treasure the valley's high plains and ponderosa pines for camping, stargazing and wilderness survival training among bison and one of the largest elk herds in the West.

It was first called the "valley of life" by Jicarilla Apache and Moache Ute Indians centuries ago because its meadows were overflowing with game.

Next to the valley, on a ranch owned by CNN founder Ted Turner, about 500 gas wells have been installed since 1999. One of these pumps chugs beside the road into the Valle Vidal, encircled by pipes, electrical equipment and trash thrown by work crews.

Advocates are trying to keep the drillers out of the valley, to prevent the kind of destruction that has hurt another section of the Carson National Forest.

About five hours west, in the forest's Jicarilla Ranger District, a stunning landscape of sandstone hills and gnarled pinon pines has been transformed over decades into an industrial zone, with almost 700 pumps and a checkerboard of roads, gas compressors, pipes, refineries, storage tanks, bulldozers, backhoes and barbed-wire fences.

The most outspoken opponents of this kind of drilling in the Valle Vidal are Boy Scouts. Their nearby 67-year-old Philmont Scout Ranch attracts 22,000 boys a year from all over the country, and its directors have written to Congress and others in protest.

"As a scout, I hiked through the Valle Vidal last year and it had a huge impact on my life," wrote Daniel J. Mallison, a 19-year-old Eagle Scout from Elizabethtown, Pa., in one of about 7,000 letters that have poured into U.S. Forest Service offices in opposition to the drilling proposal. "It would be nothing short of a tragedy to destroy this beautiful land."

The Forest Service is considering these letters and other information as it studies the possibility of drilling in the Valle Vidal, with a land management plan expected by September 2006, said Benjamin Romero, a spokesman for the Forest Service.

Three years ago, the El Paso natural gas company, attracted to the Valle Vidal because it had succeeded in extracting natural gas from the adjacent ranch, wrote to the federal Bureau of Land Management asking the government to allow competitive bidding for the mineral rights to drill on about 40 percent of the Valle Vidal, according to BLM records and an El Paso spokesman.

The 77-year-old El Paso Corp. owns the nation's largest natural gas pipeline network and is also one of the country's biggest oil and gas production companies. Led by former Halliburton chief executive Douglas L. Foshee, the Texas-based company is politically active, donating more than \$2 million to mostly Republican political candidates and causes since 2000 through its employees and political action committees, records show.

The suggestion that El Paso might drill among the camping grounds of Valle Vidal immediately raised safety concerns among activists. Twelve campers, including 6-month-old twins, burned to death near Carlsbad, N.M., on Aug. 19, 2000, when El Paso's failure to detect corrosion in one of its natural gas pipelines caused an explosion with a 496-foot fireball, according to a National Transportation Safety Board report.

The company faces a \$2.5 million federal fine for the failure.

"People come from all over the country to enjoy the peace and solitude here, and that peace would be totally destroyed if there were hundreds of pipes and wells all over the place," said Oscar Simpson, 56, a former water quality analyst with the New Mexico Environment Department who is helping to lead the Coalition for the Valle Vidal.

Bruce Connery, vice president of public relations for El Paso, said the Carlsbad accident, which happened on private land, was unlikely to happen again because any drilling in the Valle Vidal would be carefully regulated by the Forest Service to make sure people are kept away from potentially dangerous areas.

"The Forest Service has committed to be good stewards of the Valle Vidal. ... And they would set forth surface restrictions that would certainly ensure the safety of the public," Connery said.

In 2002, the Forest Service set aside El Paso's initial request to drill in the Valle Vidal, saying a lack of money and staff would put off analysis of the proposal for up to eight years, records show. A study would require an additional \$1.6 million in federal funds, to allow the Forest Service to hire more employees and a contractor, wrote Martin Chavez, supervisor of the Carson National Forest. Even with the additional funds, the analysis could not be started until 2005 and would take at least three years, he added.

White House help

Frustrated by delays that the company said amounted to a rejection, El Paso sought help a year later from Bush's newly formed White House Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining. "We need new natural gas supplies more than ever. We believe that the Valle Vidal Unit could be a vital new source," Merryl Burpoe, federal government affairs director for El Paso, wrote to the White House.

Robert W. Middleton, director of the White House task force, sent a memo to the Forest Service a month later calling for a quick response to El Paso's request and asking for an explanation of any "unresolved internal issues" that lay in the way.

When they received that memo, officials of the Carson National Forest decided they could pursue the more accelerated schedule, after receiving none of the additional staff and only \$100,000 of the \$1.6 million requested.

"We did a little bit of adjusting to accommodate," said David Seesholtz, planner for the forest. "We have adjusted people's work schedules."

The Forest Service released a consultant's report last July concluding that the potential was high for the successful development of up to 500 wells in the Valle Vidal, records show.

Leon Fager, who retired in 1998 after 31 years as a Forest Service biologist, said that since the White House's involvement, some of his former colleagues are "scared to death" to speak up about potential problems caused by drilling, such as disturbances to elk or pollution in streams.

"There is a lot of pressure on the Carson National Forest to use the Valle Vidal to drill for oil and gas, and it's coming right from the White House," Fager said. "Whenever people at the Forest Service offer resistance, they feel insecure for their careers because of the phone calls from Washington."

Chavez, supervisor of the forest, confirmed that he got a phone call from the White House task force about the drilling request. But he said neither he nor his employees have been influenced to deviate from their normal evaluation process.

"We haven't felt any pressure from anybody," Chavez said. "It's not unusual to get inquiries. That is their prerogative. In this case they [the White House task force] were asking us for a reality check on the timeline."

Connery, the El Paso spokesman, said drilling could be done in an unobtrusive way.

For many here, that claim holds little credibility. A growing number are forced to live with wells in their backyards because of "split estate" situations, common in the West, in which the landowner has rights to the surface, while energy companies own the mineral rights underneath.

Richard "Sam" Lopez, a 59-year-old construction company owner who lives a short drive north in Weston, Col., said the four coal-bed methane wells installed against his will on his property chug loudly day and night, taint his water with a sulfurous smell and spill pollutants that have killed his pine trees and shrubs.

Drilling trucks rumble onto the property without warning to dig apart his scenic hillsides, ruining the serenity of what he once dreamed would be his dream house with panoramic views of the Rocky Mountains.

"The noise and chaos, day and night, has totally taken away the solitude and peacefulness we used to have out here in the West," said Lopez.

It's this potential for clatter and runoff that has brought together the diverse interests that make up the Coalition for the Valle Vidal.

On a recent afternoon, two leaders of the coalition - Alan Lackey, an NRA member, Republican car dealer and avid elk hunter, and Jim O'Donnell, a Nader-voting liberal environmentalist - followed a meandering creek down the heart of the valley beneath the snow-crowned Sangre de Christo Mountains.

Lackey, wearing a cowboy hat and boots with spurs, rode a horse; O'Donnell, sporting a green Sierra Club baseball cap, walked, explaining, "I'm ridiculously allergic to horses."

They passed a meadow of swaying grass, stands of pines whispering in the breeze, the skeleton of an elk jutting from a streambed, and flowers blossoming between patches of melting ice.

"Liberal or conservative, we all share a love of the outdoor lifestyle - a love of the land," Lackey said. "We shouldn't sell our souls, sell out the land that sustains us, for the short-term financial gain of a private company trying to profit from the public's land."

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