

"Plunderland"

Published on Tuesday, June 14, 2005

Section: EDITORIAL Page: 14A

Edition: FINAL

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EVERY SO often during Washington's long-running battle over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska came warnings that the conflict was an elaborate diversion drawing attention away from equally ruinous violations of public lands in the lower 48.

As The Sun's Tom Pelton recently reported, those warnings have been dismayingly dead-on.

Federal permits for drilling on previously pristine and protected parts of five Western states have more than tripled over the past six years, with the pace escalating as the Bush administration responds to soaring prices of oil and gas.

Forests are being plundered, water supplies are being poisoned, federal regulators are being intimidated by the White House, and ranchers and recreational users are being driven off the land -- all for the sake of erecting hundreds of noisy, polluting wells to extract whatever fossil fuels lie beneath.

"They are sacrificing us, sacrificing the environment, sacrificing everything to drill these wells," New Mexico rancher Linn Blancett told Mr. Pelton.

Even if such devastation represented the only way to meet America's energy needs, it would be unconscionable without demanding conservation, as Mr. Bush refuses to do in energy legislation now before the Senate. But this violation of the nation's last natural places is less forgivable because it isn't the only way to produce energy -- just the cheapest, easiest and most profitable for Bush allies in the industry.

Consider the case of Valle Vidal, the "valley of life" in northern New Mexico's Carson National Forest, favored by bison, elk, campers and stargazers. The El Paso natural gas company wants to drill on more than 40 percent of the valley's 167 square miles.

The U.S. Forest Service initially balked, saying it lacked the money and staff required to analyze the impact of such a proposal. But the White House intervened on behalf of the politically active company and suddenly the

timetable for review sped up. An answer isn't due until sometime next year, but a favorable consultant's report and some visible quaking by Forest Service employees signals which way it's likely to go.

Americans undone by their fuel bills -- or even worried about securing independence from unstable foreign energy sources -- may consider the protection of public lands a luxury they can't afford.

But it makes no sense to burn through the last bit of oil and gas in America before the nation gets serious about investing in the development of alternatives. Alaska's refuge hasn't even been spared; Congress is about to give the go-head for drilling there to get under way next.

So the diversionary tactic worked brilliantly. Unless Americans fight back, they'll wind up with nothing but a wasteland.