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OIL AND GAS: Oil exploration may begin in Calif. national monument (Thursday, March 6, 2008)

Colleen Luccioli, *Land Letter* editor

Potential oil and gas exploration in the heart of the Carrizo Plain National Monument is raising concerns among environmentalists who cite problematic effects to endangered species and disruption to the area's grasslands as reasons the plan should not go forward.

Vintage Production, a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum, has notified the Bureau of Land Management that it plans to explore for oil and gas in an area within the monument. The company held the mineral rights to the area prior to 2001, when former President Clinton designated the area as a national monument, so the monument status cannot prevent the company from pursuing exploration. John Dearing, a spokesman for California BLM, said that though the agency is still awaiting a formal proposal from the company, Vintage Production has said it would like to conduct a 5-mile test to determine whether further exploration is warranted.

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San Joaquin kit foxes, an endangered species, scamper through the grasslands in the Carrizo Plains National Monument. Photo courtesy of BLM.

The news isn't being well received by the community.

"If oil companies want to drill here, they will face a big fight," said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of Los Padres ForestWatch. "We'll be battling them every step of the way."

Alice Bond, public lands associate with the Wilderness Society, noted the ecological importance of the area, pointing out that the San Joaquin grasslands host habitat for several endangered species.

BLM also touts the area's ecological importance in the protection and recovery of many plant and animal species. In fact, the Fish and Wildlife Service relies on the area for recovery plans and for land acquisition and management of several species.

The 250,000 acre area includes the largest remaining contiguous habitats for many endangered, threatened and rare species including the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the San Joaquin blunt-nosed leopard lizard, antelope squirrel and the giant kangaroo rat. The monument also provides habitat for many listed plant species including the California jewelflower, Hoover's wooly-star and

San Joaquin woollythreads.

In addition, the Carrizo Plain National Monument contains critical habitat for California condors as well as being the first area in California to host reintroduction of both the pronghorn antelope and the Tule elk.

Bond explained that the habitat of these animals outside of the monument's boundaries have been "highly impacted" due to oil and gas drilling but the monument provides sanctuary for them.

BLM itself boasts that the monument, lying adjacent to the southwest edge of the San Joaquin Valley in eastern San Luis Obispo County, exhibits "only limited evidence of human alteration."

Is it worthwhile?

According to Dearing, current oil and gas production on the monument is limited to a parcel in the southwest corner of the monument and to a small area in the northeast portion of the monument. He said that in both cases, the activity is on the fringes of the monument with much of the activity occurring outside the monument's boundaries.

"Allowing oil development would forever degrade this national treasure," said Kuyper, explaining that even a limited amount of development activity could result in water pollution, habitat destruction and ruined vistas.

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A view of the Carrizo Plains National Monument. The area contains important stretches of San Joaquin grasslands and hosts habitat for a range of endangered species. Photo courtesy of BLM.

Though he conceded that the skyrocketing price of oil has pushed oil companies to explore resources previously considered insignificant, Kuyper questioned the merit of pursuing such activity in an area that is not expected to harbor considerable reserves of oil. "We have to evaluate whether it's worth ruining a special place for a small amount of oil," he said.

In addition, several environmental groups are concerned about the implications of the exploratory activities, let alone actual drilling. According to Dearing, Vintage Production is planning to use thumper trucks, which creates vibrations that help determine underground resources.

"This is a highly invasive way to explore for oil," said Bond.

Of particular concern to environmentalists is the potential effect the drilling activities could have on the endangered kangaroo rat, an animal that burrows underground and thumps to communicate with its fellow animals. The animal's habitat overlaps almost entirely with the area Vintage Production plans to explore.

In reviewing the application, Dearing said BLM "would have to look at mitigation measures." The bureau spokesman also noted, "In their proposal, Vintage Productions will have to tell us how they would mitigate any potential impacts to endangered species and their habitats."

Kuyper noted that Vintage Production was responsible for an oil spill last year in the Los Padres National Forest, which neighbors the monument. The spill polluted three miles of mountain stream. Los Padres ForestWatch has sued the company over damage incurred by nearly a dozen similar spills over the past few years.

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