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# Loophole could open Thompson Creek to gas, oil exploration

Study says loophole could unlock leases on nearly 14,000 acres outside Carbondale

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The Aspen Times

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CARBONDALE — An environmental watchdog claims that a cagey maneuver in the waning days of the Bush administration could open 87,147 acres of national forest in Colorado, including 13,663 acres near Carbondale, to oil and gas exploration.

The Pew Environment Group said Wednesday that the administration is expected to issue new rules this month, possibly as soon as Friday, that could unlock lands in Colorado's roadless areas. The group issued a report called "Leasing Colorado's Legacy: New Roadless Plan Opens Backcountry to Drilling" to detail the stakes.

The report claims that 17 gas leases that are currently off limits for exploration and production southwest of Carbondale could be unfrozen if the administration is successful. Those leases are in the Thompson Creek area, southwest of Carbondale.

"Oil and gas development here could quickly and permanently change the landscape, threatening hiking and climbing along Thompson Creek, a popular destination, providing excellent hiking, climbing and boasting great views of Mount Sopris and the Roaring Fork Valley," the Pew Environment Group study says.

The sequence of events that occurred to potentially unlock roadless lands in Colorado to gas extraction is convoluted. The major events are:

- Former President Bill Clinton approved a roadless rule in 2001, shortly before leaving office, that prohibited road construction on inventoried roadless areas for uses such as oil and gas exploration.
- President Bush overturned the Clinton Roadless Rule in May 2005. His administration created a system that required states to petition for protection of roadless lands. While forming his own policy, Bush allowed roadless lands to be leased. The majority of the lands in Thompson Creek were offered for lease in May 2003.
- A federal judge reinstated the Clinton Roadless Rule in September 2006. However, before that court decision, Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter decided the state would participate in a process which sets rules on roadless federal lands. Ritter called it an "insurance policy" against unknown federal government and court actions. But that move could now backfire, the Pew Environment Group said. Colorado and Idaho are the only states that chose to participate in the rulemaking process. Other states with national forests are covered by the Clinton Roadless Rule

- The Bush administration is using a loophole to claim that oil and gas projects on 97 leases covering 87,147 acres of roadless lands in Colorado can proceed because the federal protections didn't cover those areas while Colorado enacted its rules, the Pew Environment Group said.

"Ironically, the petition process endorsed by Governor Ritter to protect Colorado's roadless areas from litigation and other challenges will result instead in singling out Colorado's 4.4 million acres of backcountry forests as a target for future road-building and development, as they will be less protected than those in other states," the study says.

The Bush position could potentially open an estimated 42,569 acres in the White River National Forest – mostly in the Rifle district. It could affect lands near McClure Pass as well as the Thompson Creek area, the study says.

Steve Smith, associate regional director for The Wilderness Society, said environmentalists aren't at odds with Ritter over the issue.

"We're much more focused on what the feds are doing," Smith said. "We're not blaming the governor."

The Pew report claimed the federal government's plan to allow oil and gas projects in the backcountry hasn't been thoroughly reviewed for environmental impacts. It recommended that Ritter ask the Bush administration to suspend new rules so the impacts can be assessed.

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