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Pipeline could cross forest roadless areas. 20-inch natural gas line to pass through 3 counties.

By MIKE McKIBBIN
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GLENWOOD SPRINGS - A 25 1/2-mile-long natural gas pipeline would cross portions of three roadless areas in the White River and Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests, under the preferred route in a final environmental impact statement released Friday.

The Bull Mountain pipeline project calls for a 20-inch gas pipeline and an 8-inch produced-water pipeline to pass through portions of Gunnison, Delta, Mesa and Garfield counties within a 50-foot right-of way.

A final decision on the pipeline route will follow within 30 days, the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service said.

The proposed route would cross parts of the Clear Creek, Baldy Mountain and East Willow roadless areas, and conservation groups accused the two agencies of having "unwisely chosen the most destructive and potentially illegal path" for the pipeline.

Wilderness Workshop, Western Colorado Congress, Western Slope Environmental Resource Council and the High Country Citizens Alliance said they want the pipeline to avoid roadless areas.

While the federal agencies said their decision is not a violation of the 2001 Roadless Rule, conservationists said the agencies used terms such as "temporary-use areas" or "construction corridor" to skirt the spirit and letter of the law.

Robin Cooley, an attorney for Earthjustice, called the move "a clear violation" of the Roadless Rule, and worried it could set a national precedent.

"If we let the Forest Service get away with this at Bull Mountain, they will likely pursue construction of temporary roads in other roadless areas, where they are currently banned," she said.

Mark Schofield with Western Colorado Congress noted the final environmental impact statement concedes the project will have "significant adverse impacts" on roadless areas.

Forest Service spokeswoman Lee Ann Loupe said the document does recognize those impacts.

"Decision makers felt those impacts would be temporary; there won't be any irreversible and irretrievable impacts," she said. "There have to be trucks and heavy equipment to put in a pipeline, but the area will be reclaimed and closed to motorized vehicles. And they'll be working in the smallest (100-foot) right-of-way possible."

Gunnison Energy and S.G. Interests of Texas are partners in the Bull Mountain pipeline. Gunnison Energy President Brad Robinson said the pipeline is needed to take gas from wells in Delta and Gunnison counties to market, and he understands the concerns of conservation groups about crossing roadless areas.

"We always try to limit our work in those areas, as well as anywhere else on public and private lands," he said.

Approximately 10 miles of the pipeline would be adjacent to and parallel to the existing Ragged Mountain and Rocky Mountain Natural Gas pipelines, the environmental impact statement said.

Conservation groups also said the pipeline's size would encourage the development of as many as 282 wells, compared to the 55 to 60 wells analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. The groups said that scale of development would turn some of the best elk and bear country in Colorado "into an industrial zone resembling the gas fields along Interstate 70."

Robinson said the pipeline is larger than currently needed so it can handle potential future production from the area.

"Since we know we're going through roadless areas and national forests, we wanted to put in the largest pipeline we can now and not have to go back in again," Robinson said.

The pipeline will be designed to transport more than 80 million cubic feet of gas per day, the environmental impact statement said, and it will have an estimated 50-year lifetime, based on industry standards.

Gunnison Energy and S.G. Interests hope to start work on the pipeline in the spring and have it ready for use by next winter, Robinson said.

The Bull Mountain final environmental impact statement is available on the following Web sites: www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver/projects, www.co.blm.gov/gsra/gshome.htm and www.fs.fed.us/r2/gmug/policy.

CD-ROM copies are available at the BLM Glenwood Springs Field Office, or the forest supervisor offices of the White River or GMUG national forests.

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