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Gas pipeline could cross roadless area

Dennis Webb
Glenwood Springs correspondent
Aspen, CO Colorado
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GLENWOOD SPRINGS — The federal government may be little more than a month away from authorizing construction of a natural gas pipeline through a roadless area, something environmentalists say could have national implications.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service this week issued a final environmental impact statement for the Bull Mountain Pipeline, which would run from northwest Gunnison County to the Divide Creek area south of Silt.

The study calls for the pipeline to cross about eight miles of roadless areas in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests and the White River National Forest. It would follow the right of way of a smaller, 1980s-era pipeline. The study reaffirms the findings of a prior, draft study.

A final decision on the proposal will follow no sooner than 30 days after the availability of the study is announced in the Federal Register.

Several environmental groups say the proposal would violate the 2001 roadless rule.

“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. This case has national ramifications,” Robin Cooley, an attorney for Earthjustice, said in a news release issued by groups including Wilderness Workshop, Western Colorado Congress, the Western Slope Environmental Resource Council and the High Country Citizens Alliance.

The BLM and Forest Service say the proposed route is consistent with the roadless rule.

Brad Robinson, president of Gunnison Energy Corp., which would own half of the pipeline, says another gas pipeline is being built through another nearby roadless area, in Hells Gulch south of Silt. And dozens of pipelines and utility lines go through other roadless areas, he said.

The environmental groups say the pipeline construction will require building a road with travel lanes and passing lanes. But the government is calling the road something else, such as a temporary use area or construction corridor, “to skirt the spirit and letter of the law to punch this project through,” they said in their news release.

Robinson contends the route has fewer environmental impacts than a longer one that would follow an existing road. That creates a practical problem for environmental groups trying to act on principle, he said.

“I think they’ll really have a difficult time representing that this is the wrong decision for this specific project,”

he said.

Mark Schofield, with Western Colorado Congress, said the Forest Service concluded that the project “ will have significant adverse impacts” on roadless areas.

Colorado has asked for protection of roadless areas, and the Forest Service has agreed to let the state review analysis of projects within areas affected by the 2001 roadless rule. The pipeline project was begun before a court ruling that reinstated the 2001 rule after the Bush administration had sought to replace it. However, the Forest Service gave the the state the opportunity to review the pipeline project prior to decision-making, the federal government said.

Environmentalists also contend the pipeline’s 20-inch-diameter size has the ability to accommodate up to 282 gas wells. That’s far more than the 55 to 60 analyzed in the new study, and the Forest Service has failed to disclose and analyze the impacts of additional gas development, they say.

The government contends it evaluated possible future development to the extent possible, given the speculative nature of oil and gas development.

Charlie Richmond, supervisor of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests, said the pipeline is intended to be big enough to avoid the need for building another one later, which would require future disturbance and expense.

Robinson said he hadn’t thought the pipeline project would become so controversial, and it’s possible that environmental groups might sue, which would delay construction.

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