

# Bush rule could increase gas drilling

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The Aspen Times  
Aspen, CO Colorado,

CARBONDALE — Natural gas drilling would be allowed on 13,663 acres of the White River National Forest southwest of Carbondale under a new plan by the Bush administration, according to an environmental group.

A report released today by the Pew Environment Group said 17 leases in the Thompson Creek Inventoried Roadless Area could be made available for gas exploration and drilling. Currently, any activity on those leases is frozen by a court injunction.

But in a report called “Leasing Colorado’s Legacy: New Roadless Plan Opens Backcountry to Drilling,” the Pew Environment Foundation said the Bush administration intends to repeal special protections for roadless areas in Colorado.

If that is successful, it would open a total of 87,147 acres of national forests to drilling by letting activity to move forward on lands already leased, the report said. That includes an estimated 42,569 acres in the White River National Forest — mostly in the Rifle district. However, forest land also has been leased in the Carbondale area.

Activity on 97 leases, including the 17 in the Thompson Creek area, has been prohibited since a federal court decision was made in 2006 reinstating a roadless rule approved by former President Bill Clinton. The Bush administration tried to rescind Clinton’s protections for roadless lands.

The Pew Environment Foundation is urging Colo. Gov. Bill Ritter to ask the Bush administration to suspend its new rulemaking so that the environmental impact of drilling on the 97 leases can be studied.

Read more about this environmental battle in Thursday’s Aspen Times.

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