



Otero Mesa Oil and Gas Development Threatens Critical Groundwater Supply

"The bottom line message for the average person and also for the states and federal government is that they'd better start planning for a Southwest region in which the water resources are increasingly stretched."

-Richard Seager, lead author of a study included in the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, Columbia University's Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory¹

A critical source of groundwater, the Salt Basin Aquifer is located beneath New Mexico's Otero Mesa and extends south into El Paso and Hudspeth Counties in Texas. Even though the Southwest U.S. is expected to become even hotter and drier from global warming according to a recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, the Salt Basin Aquifer continues to be under threat by proposed oil and gas development in federal Bureau of Land Management Lands in Otero Mesa.

- According to the 2003 State Water Plan for New Mexico, the Otero Mesa region contains 15 million acre-feet of potable water and over 30 million acre-feet of total recoverable water.²
- A 2005 comprehensive study by Sandia National Laboratories has determined that the Otero Mesa region could provide enough freshwater for 1 million people over 40 years.³
- "Portions of aquifers located in the Planning Area [for oil and gas development] are considered highly vulnerable to contamination," according to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and "due to the water scarcity the potential for contamination is of concern."⁴
- The BLM identifies that the groundwater beneath Otero Mesa could be potentially contaminated during the processes of drilling, waste management activities, and reinjection of produced water from fluid minerals development.⁴

Under the BLM's plan for oil and gas development in the Otero Mesa region 141 exploratory wells resulting in 84 producing wells could be drilled.⁵ While the BLM has provided stipulations for No Surface Disturbance or Controlled Surface Use for a portion of this area, groundwater will still be at risk for contamination by carcinogenic petrochemicals and salt water from drilling. With only an estimated 13 billion cubic feet of natural gas⁶ available from Otero Mesa compared to the 1,592 billion cubic feet of natural gas New Mexico produced in 2005⁷, **is it worth the potential contamination of such a vital water resource?**

Solution: A 3 year joint federal and state study of the Salt Basin Aquifer is needed to determine its quantity, quality, and its vulnerability to contamination. A federal moratorium on oil and gas leasing and development on federal Bureau of Land Management lands is needed to ensure that we adequately assess this water resource and determine how it should be managed, developed and protected.

Call or write your Senators and Representatives and tell them to halt oil and gas leasing in Otero Mesa until a 3 year groundwater study is completed!

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¹ New York Times, "Climate Change Threatens New Dust Bowl," 4/5/2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/us/AP-Dust-Bowl.html>

² New Mexico Office of the State Engineer/Interstate Stream Commission, "2003 New Mexico State Water Plan: Appendix A Water Resource Issues," 1/9/2004. http://www.ose.state.nm.us/water-info/NMWaterPlanning/A_Water_Resources_Issues1.pdf

³ The Wilderness Society, "Groundwater Supply Beneath Otero Mesa." http://www.oteromesa.org/OteroGW_facts.pdf.pdf

⁴ BLM, "Proposed Resource Management Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement for Federal Fluid Leasing and Development in Sierra and Otero Counties Volume I," Dec. 2003. http://www.nm.blm.gov/lcfo/white_sands_rmpa_eis/docs/Vol%20I.pdf

⁵ BLM, "Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan Amendment for Federal Fluid Minerals Leasing and Development in Sierra and Otero Counties," Jan. 2005. http://www.nm.blm.gov/lcfo/white_sands_rmpa_eis/docs/PRINTABLEROD-LCFO-FINAL_text.pdf

⁶ New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department/Ecos Consulting, "2000 NM Gas Production, County Production, Otero Mesa Potential," (chart) 2000. http://www.oteromesa.org/fact_2000_production.htm

⁷ New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, "Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department 2006 Annual Report," 2006. http://www.emnrd.state.nm.us/MAIN/documents/EMNRD2006_008.pdf

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