

Garfield County balks at permanent lease withdrawal in Thompson Divide

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Alex Zorn

azorn@citizentelegram.com

The more-than decade-long conversation surrounding the Thompson Divide continued on Monday as Garfield County commissioners sent a letter to U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet and other lawmakers expressing concerns with the notion of permanently withdrawing mineral leasing in the area.

While the commissioners recognize the unique recreation opportunity the rugged region west of Carbondale provides, they said they want to find a solution that respects the rights of existing mineral lease holders and future leasing.

“I feel this is a multiple-use area... [but] I’m not of the belief that if someone drills, your water goes bad and you destroy the habitat,” Commissioner Tom Jankovsky said. “I don’t feel there should be permanent withdrawal.”

He said his primary opposition to drilling in the area is related to vehicle access, especially up the Four Mile Road corridor south of Glenwood Springs.

Last month, Sen. Bennet of Colorado proposed as part of a new, broader [public lands bill](#) to permanently protect the area west of Carbondale from future oil and gas development. The proposal is part of a package of four public land conservation bills the senator introduced, known as the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act, or CORE.

County commissioners were asked to sign a letter of general support for Bennet’s Thompson Divide proposal last week. However, they chose instead to send him and other Colorado lawmakers their specific comments on the controversial topic.

11/15/2017 7:09
"The commissioners have long recognized the unique values in the Thompson Divide area that provide important habitat for wildlife, and excellent hunting and angling opportunities," the letter reads.

"Garfield County supported the concept of a legislative lease exchange that protects federal lands in the Thompson Divide area while fairly compensating energy companies with the opportunity to develop equivalent federal oil and gas leases in other areas," it continues.

The latest legislative effort from Bennet attempts to bar future oil and gas development in the remote backcountry area that stretches from Four Mile Park south of Glenwood Springs across the Thompson Creek drainage to the top of McClure Pass, and west to the upper Divide Creek area.

While the commissioners reiterated their desire to keep the Thompson Divide area attractive for multiple uses, they did not support Bennet's desire to leave the lands free of oil and gas development permanently.

In September of last year, a federal court upheld the 2017 BLM decision to cancel 18 undeveloped natural gas leases in the region. A half dozen other leases were also canceled in that decision.

And, in 2015, the White River National Forest as part of its oil and gas leasing management plan removed the area from its available inventory of lands for new oil and gas leases over the next 20 years.

The commissioners felt the leases should be readdressed during the next Forest Service management plan and did not think it was fair to permanently withdraw the area from future leasing.

Mike Pritchard, a member of the Thompson Divide Coalition and area mountain biking advocate, spoke during the comment portion of Monday's meeting, expressing his thanks for the commissioners' support in wanting to protect the region.

"The Thompson Divide is important for us and I urge you to continue to work with us," he said. "Thank you for your support and for moving forward."

He added in a followup written statement: "The long term benefit of the [CORE] Act will be its support for Colorado's growing recreation economy and the stores, restaurants, lodges and other businesses that rely on natural landscapes, including the Thompson Divide."

Scott Willoughby with Trout Unlimited also spoke at the meeting, and reiterated the importance of the Thompson Divide ecosystem to recreation users of all kinds.

Other members of the TDC offered prepared statements following the commissioners' letter on Monday.

“Although the commissioners are wavering on language regarding permanence, something that they have specifically supported in the past, we all want the same thing for the Divide – to protect these special areas from energy development while respecting existing rights and leaseholders,” said Dorothea Farris, a former Pitkin County commissioner.

“Senator Bennet’s legislation gets us there,” she said.

Offered Jason Sewell, a fifth-generation rancher in the Crystal River Valley: “This year, we have a chance, with Senator Bennet’s help, to take this area off the table for future oil and gas development, protecting it for its current uses forever. Let’s get this done.”

