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SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

**- PRESS RELEASE -
FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION**

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**50,000 Citizens Comment on Baca National Wildlife Refuge
Public Outcry “Overwhelming”**

Nearly 50,000 people from across the nation have commented on behalf of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge —with early indications showing that nearly all are in favor of protection of one of Colorado’s greatest natural treasures from industrialization. The US Fish and Wildlife Service Office in Alamosa is still working on the final tally.

“It’s overwhelming,” said Christian Dillo, Director of the Crestone Spiritual Alliance. “This is a tremendously beautiful and powerful place and because of that, Spiritual traditions from all over the world have chosen to locate here. It’s vital that the refuge, and nearby communities be protected from destructive oil and gas development.”

Kizzen Laki, mayor of the Town of Crestone and Owner of the *Crestone Eagle* newspaper commented that, “drilling in the Baca National Wildlife Refuge is totally incompatible with the purpose of the refuge, this is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge of Colorado. Why sacrifice one of our nations largest and most valuable refuges and the wildlife, wetlands and vast aquifers that they feed, for the benefit of a high-risk wildcat Canadian oil venture?”

“Oil and gas development in the Baca NWR makes absolutely no sense,” says San Luis Valley farmer and rancher, Nick Chambers, “it flies in the face of what this community is about. We have been hard at work finding viable solutions to our destructive addiction to fossil fuels.”

The San Luis Valley Water Protection Coalition plans to seek copies of the 50,000 comments under the Freedom of Information Act. “We want to be certain that every citizen’s voice is heard and that all of their concerns and suggestions are included in the draft Environmental Assessment” says coordinator Tamar Ellentuck.

US Fish and Wildlife Service is allowing Lexam Explorations Inc., a high risk, wildcat Canadian venture with no experience in the gas and oil field, to drill two 14,000' deep test wells in the midst of the most sensitive and highly vulnerable wetland and riparian habitats in the refuge.

The Baca National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is one of the nations newest and largest refuges. Once completed, it will span almost 92,500 acres. There is no management plan in place. Because of that, little is known about the wildlife, habitats and cultural resources on the refuge. However, studies in the nearby Great Sand Dunes National Park suggest that the refuge could be home to more than 36 rare, threatened or endangered species.

According to a biologist with the Crestone Baca Land Trust, "the refuge contains the most concentrated, pristine and biologically diverse wetlands in the entire southwestern United States. It is a critical recharge area for the vast, complex aquifers that underlie the San Luis Valley. These waters are the lifeblood of wildlife, agriculture and communities extending through the San Luis Valley, into the Rio Grande, through New Mexico, Texas and all the way to Mexico."

Because of its many extraordinary biological, hydrological and cultural values, the Baca NWR has been chosen for inclusion as part of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area currently being considered by Senator Salazar.

A lawsuit filed this spring by the Energy Minerals Law Center on behalf of the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council requires the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Before the lawsuit, USFWS claimed that it had no authority to regulate Lexam who privately owns the mineral rights. The lawsuit forced USFWS to reverse its decision and initiate a 30-day scoping period to gather input on the publics concerns about drilling in the Baca NWR.

Many businesses and organizations joined on to the joint San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council and Crestone Baca Land Trust scoping comments. Some of their key requests are for USFWS to place a moratorium on drilling until a Comprehensive Conservation Plan and a study of the complex aquifer system (among the largest in the US) can be completed. They are asking for a review of Lexam's drilling permits under the state gas and oil laws passed this year. Last, they are asking that no drilling be allowed near recharge areas, wetlands or riparian habitats and that no new roads be built (Lexam's proposal called for almost 7 miles of upgraded and new roads).

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