



Where the Forest Watchers Meet the River Keepers

Your local public lands advocacy organization in the San Luis Valley

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Fall 2008 Newsletter

Starting Over on Wolf Creek

Since 1999, the Friends of Wolf Creek, including SLVEC, Colorado Wild and Citizens for Responsible Development, have fought to preserve the beauty and health of the area surrounding the proposed Village at Wolf Creek. On February 20 of this year, after a federal judge blocked approval by the FS to begin construction of the access road, the USFS and developer Red McCombs agreed to start over, and complete a new, more detailed Environmental Impact Statement for the controversial development at the top of Wolf Creek Pass.

Several problems were uncovered in the initial EIS, which evaluated only the impacts of the access road, and not the environmental impacts of the entire development.

A new EIS process has begun, and public comments will be accepted until December 31, 2008. At an initial round of public meetings, held October 7, 8, and 9, it was unclear which version of the Mineral County plat required comments: the original 2004 decision, or the recent settlement agreement. When the correct version of the plat and the proposed Village are available (probably in late November), SLVEC will send e-mail alerts so that all interested parties can comment on the development. (Check slvec.org for updates)

SLVEC continues to request that the FS determine “reasonable access” based on the carrying capacity of the area — including water and utility availability, highway safety, wetland avoidance, and protection of the Rio Grande watershed. We will also request that the FS enforce the scenic easement that the public owns on McCombs’ property, which restricts industrial facilities, prevents storage of hazardous materials, and looks at land use proposals for the property. Additionally, we are asking for a full evaluation of impacts, including water quality & quantity, wildlife, wetlands, and traffic. SLVEC would like to see this inholding go back to public ownership.

Work continues on Lexam drilling proposal

“The revisions by Lexam’s attorney and industry-friendly Bush officials may have significantly misrepresented the likely impact of drilling in the Baca NWR. Unfortunately, the government still has not disclosed the specific changes made by Lexam’s attorney to internal drafts of the environmental assessment.”

Brad Bartlett

Attorney

Energy Minerals

Law Center

In May of 2007, SLVEC filed a lawsuit asking that the USF&WS be required to undergo the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process with regard to Lexam’s proposal to drill two 14,000’ wells on the new Baca National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge is so new that they have not yet had a chance to do a Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan, which is not scheduled until 2010. SLVEC believes that there must be a CCP or an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) done before any exploratory drilling is allowed to proceed. Without the CCP, there is no baseline data on which to base environmental impacts.

Local citizens and national constituents submitted over 47,000 comments, with

help from NRDC, opposed to energy development on the Baca NWR. But the EA, released in late October, stated that there would be no adverse impacts due to drilling.

SLVEC disagrees. Documents requested under FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) show that Lexam exerted influence on the Department of the Interior Solicitor’s Office, which specifically directed the USF&WS not to assess the drilling impacts of Lexam’s plan.

We have recently filed to reopen the original lawsuit. When the 2000 legislation was passed to create the refuge the mineral rights were not included in the purchase price. SLVEC would like to see the mineral rights purchased on behalf of the American public and development rights retired.

Quest for oil & gas leases continues

On March 14, 2008, the Bureau of Land Management offered a 146,000 acre oil and gas lease parcel sale, primarily on Forest Service lands in the San Juan Mountains near Del Norte and South Fork. The size and scope of the offering was unprecedented in Colorado. These parcels are on sensitive areas of the forest, including 19,000 acres of Roadless Areas; critical seasonal habitat for big game; habitats for special, threatened, or endangered species (such as lynx, bald eagle, and bighorn sheep); and areas where the slope is over 40% (where erosion from road and pad construction could cause significant stream sedimentation and habitat destruction). Many of the lease parcels lie within watersheds containing the endangered Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout. These parcels straddle two tributaries to the Rio Grande and the town of Del Norte municipal watershed.

SLVEC worked with a coalition of regional and national environmental organizations, and organized local citizen groups from the Rio Grande and Saguache areas to pressure County Commissioners to respond. Ninety-eight protests were submitted to the BLM office, the majority coming from the SLV. Rio Grande County officials requested a deferral, and Saguache Commissioners requested a complete withdrawal of the parcels. Our congressional delegation also requested deferral.

All the lease sale parcels have been temporarily withdrawn, though they could be offered again sometime in the future. SLVEC, along with the coalition that has been built for this process, will continue to work for complete withdrawal of these lease sale parcels. In the meantime, Saguache County has passed oil and gas regulations, and Rio Grande County has enacted a two-month moratorium while they review proposed regulations.



Photo by David Montgomery

Alamosa Ranch

The Alamosa Ranch is made up of 1300 acres of open space, woods, and wildlife habitat bordering the Rio Grande and owned by the City of Alamosa. With urging from SLVEC, the Alamosa City Council has created a seven-member board to determine the future of the ranch. SLVEC wants to protect or restrict development on the ranch, and is seeking community support to place conservation easements on all or significantly large portions of the acreage. A public meeting presenting the management plan put together by SLVEC and CFAR will be held in November. Watch the Valley Courier for exact date and

Water Quality Project on Track

The SLV LEAP HIGH project, begun in 2006 to assess the water quality of private wells in the SLV, has made substantial progress this year. The Immigrant Resource Center and CSU Cooperative Extension Services have been invited to present and join the 25 partners who formed the collaborative in 2006. With the help of Della Vieira (Alamosa County Nursing Service) and Maya ter Kuile, the project has produced a Quality Assurance Project Plan and Project Performance Measures to comply with EPA guidelines. SLVEC is a finalist for a grant that would provide funds for additional free and reduced-cost well testing next year. Please contact the SLVEC office at 589-1518, or visit the website at slvec.org for more infor-

Citizens Group is Back

The San Luis Valley Water Protection Coalition (formerly the *Citizens for San Luis Valley Water*) has been re-activated, in order to help with the threats to SLV water from proposed Oil & Gas development, and to research impacts from utility-scale, Concentrated Solar Plants (CSP). Ceal Smith is the acting director. WPC has been very busy helping SLVEC with testimony and public comment in the lawsuit concerning Lexam's proposed drilling, and in the FOIA lawsuit to uncover related documents. Visit slvwater.org for more info.



\$\$ You Make it All Possible!! \$\$

Dear Friends of Landscape:

Who would have thought, after eight years of intense effort to expedite mandated energy development in the Rockies, that the San Luis Valley and surrounding public lands would manage to stay intact?

Who would have thought, after ten years of development focus on the Village at Wolf Creek, that the area remains a pristine landscape containing fen wetlands and a wildlife migratory corridor for Canada lynx?

Who would have thought, when Lexam planned to drill on the Baca NWR in 2006, that the landscape could remain unscathed because of all our efforts to stop them?

This is only possible because of your financial support. It is through the generous giving of our membership that we are able to maintain this boundary of protective environmental security for the San Luis Valley and upper Rio Grande region.

- * Environmental security can only be sustained through **public process**, and we work hard to see that the voices of SLV citizens are heard on these and other issues impacting public lands.
- * We believe in the power of **proactive planning**, working to protect the health and ecological integrity of the SLV through the water quality project, travel management planning, the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, and the Citizens' Energy Initiative.
- * When necessary, we take **legal action** and engage the court system to maintain integrity of the NEPA process.

All this requires time and financial resources to accomplish. We are your local public lands advocacy organization in the San Luis Valley. **Please give generously at this time** to help us continue this important work.

Sincerely,

Christine Canaly, Director

Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area

SLVEC has been working in conjunction with Los Caminos Antiguos, Fort Garland Museum, Adams State College, and the counties of Costilla, Conejos, and Alamosa, to establish the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. An NHA is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a distinctive landscape.

Such a landscape exists here in the San Luis Valley, where Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo cultures interacted. Buffalo hunting and the indigenous nomadic life gave way to penitente moradas, Mexican land grants, and later to the military, railroads, mining, and agriculture. Much of the cultural history was preserved, in part because of the geographic isolation of the area. Seventeenth century Spanish is still spoken here.

Senate Bill 443 and House Bill 859 to establish the NHA are currently before Congressional members for consideration. Watch the news for the latest information.

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Is Green Energy Always Clean Energy?

SLVEC is very excited to be part of the new energy economy, and its shift toward renewable energies. The San Luis Valley has been identified by the Governor's Energy Office as a prime location for solar development.



While many forms of solar energy production are green and clean (such as the photo-voltaic plant built north of Mosca last year), there are some utility-scale proposals that raise concerns. Concentrated Solar Plants employ technologies that are heavy water-users. They often use chemicals to treat water, for the cooling tower, and for boilers. Other types of CSP systems use "power-towers" that can be hundreds of feet high, and use molten salt or other fluids for heat storage.

In addition to the concerns with CSP, large high-voltage transmission lines are required in order to export the energy produced. Recently, Tri-State Generation & Transmission, Xcel Energy, and San Luis Valley Rural Electric Cooperative held public meetings to discuss the transmission line proposed for the SLV. To produce power on a utility scale, CSP requires 230kW line, according to NREL. Transmission lines cost \$1 million per mile or more to build, according to the Colorado Energy Forum, and the Colorado legislature allows utilities to charge this back to customers. There are other environmental and health issues associated with large transmission lines, such as wildlife corridor fragmentation and electromagnetic fields (EMF).

SLVEC will be working closely with Maria Mondragon-Valdez, a long-time solar energy researcher, and with the Water Protection Coalition to bring information to the public.

RGNF to begin travel management planning

The Rio Grande National Forest is expected to begin travel management planning in 2009, a process that will continue through 2011. SLVEC will be working in partnership with Quiet Use Coalition, The Wilderness Society, Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance, Colorado Mountain Club, Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative, and the Center for Native Ecosystems to develop an ecologically-based model Citizens Management Alternative. The RGNF is made up of 1.8 million acres of public land, containing some of Colorado's most remote wilderness. According to the 1995 Management Plan, almost half of this acreage has been designated as wilderness, roadless areas, or backcountry prescription areas. SLVEC will be working hard to insure that wildlife habitat and watershed qualities of the area are protected in the new plan.