

Tell the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the Baca National Wildlife Refuge from Oil and Gas Drilling:

The Baca National Wildlife Refuge is the largest refuge in Colorado (now at 58,000 acres, but will expand to 72,000 acres) and is one of the newest additions to the nation's complex wildlife refuge system. It was created four years ago, when the land in south central Colorado adjacent to Great Sand Dunes National Park was acquired by the federal government. The refuge contains approximately 15,000 acres of irrigated wetlands, and another 10,000 acres of playa wetlands, considered by many to be among the most concentrated, most pristine and biologically diverse wetlands in the entire southwestern United States.

The mandatory, comprehensive environmental analysis and management plan have yet to be performed. It is clear to those who are familiar with the area that the Refuge is home to threatened or endangered species including the bald eagle, greater sandhill crane, and mountain plover, and provides important aquatic habitat for an isolated species of Rio Grande Sucker – which is on the state's endangered species list and the Rio Grande Chub- which is considered to be a state species of concern. In addition to providing critical fish habitat, it contains important calving grounds for deer and elk. World-class Folsom sites that date back more than 11,000 years have been found near the Refuge, but mandatory archeological surveys have not yet taken place Refuge-wide.

Unfortunately, the Refuge property had its mineral rights severed in the 1980's while it was still private property. The federal government may not own the rights to other underground resources, such as oil and gas, but does have significant power to deny unreasonable development proposals. In this case, the majority of rights to oil and gas underneath the refuge now belong to Lexam Explorations, a private Canadian-based company, and ConocoPhillips, who are the other 25% share holders.

Now these companies want to drill deep, "high risk" exploratory wells up to 14,000 feet deep under the refuge without giving due regard to the outstanding ecological and archeological characteristics of the area. If these wells are successful, the Refuge could be turned into an industrial gas field – perhaps even threatening the Great Sand Dunes National Park.

Tell the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that drilling in the refuge would have an unreasonable impact on the outstanding ecological and archeological of the area. Please send a copy to us slvwater@fairpoint.net and we will send a copy of your letter to Lexam Explorations and ConocoPhillips.

Sample Letter

Dear Mr. Blenden:

I urge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to stop plans to drill in the Baca National Wildlife Refuge until it can be determined that drilling will not unreasonably degrade the environment. It is likely that once a full Environmental Impact Statement is prepared, it will become apparent that drilling in the unique ecological and archeological setting of the Baca NWR, including 11,000 year old Folsom sites, is unreasonable.

Since there is no comprehensive management plan in place for the refuge, all potential impacts cannot be known. Also, a comprehensive, site-specific analysis should be completed for each proposed development project with specific information on each well, road, pipeline, etc. Just recently the Bureau of Land Management decided to defer leasing near Dinosaur National Monument in northwest Colorado because amendments to the management plan for the area are in process and not yet complete.

Until a full Environmental Impact Statement and Management Plan is complete, the public will not know the full extent that the Baca NWR provides a home to threatened and endangered species, such as the globally imperiled Slender Spiderflower, potential habitat for the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, greater sandhill crane, and a genetically unique population of the endangered Rio Grande sucker fish. Although currently deemed "exploratory," the currently proposed "high risk" drilling project could open the way to massive industrial development that would destroy wildlife habitat through roadbuilding, threaten air, land, aquifer and waterways with contamination, and generate excessive traffic and noise.

No drilling should be approved until a thorough analysis is done to ensure that there will be no unreasonable impacts. Should the drilling be deemed "reasonable," the developer must be required to use all alternatives and mitigation measures to protect the sensitive values of the Refuge. These include: locating development away from meadows, wetlands and riparian areas; protecting water quality and quantity; monitoring of air and soil quality; requiring the most stringent standards for hazardous materials; and preserving important historical and cultural sites.

However, I believe that a full and fair analysis will reveal that the current "high risk" drilling proposal poses an unreasonable risk to the land, air, water, wildlife, and groundwater in the Baca NWR and the San Luis Valley in general. In addition, such analysis must evaluate a full range of options, including federal purchase of mineral rights, directional drilling from outside of the Refuge, and requiring the maximum available pollution controls.

Please protect this new wildlife refuge from any harmful drilling and conduct a thorough environmental review.

Sincerely,