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Inviting plunder: Vernal BLM plan caters too much to OHVs

Tribune Editorial

Article Last Updated: 08/29/2008 10:12:38 AM MDT

Call it a partial victory for people who want to protect the wildlife, scenic beauty and cultural resources in the Uinta Basin, Uinta Mountains and the Book Cliffs around Vernal.

The Bureau of Land Management rightly responded to the protests of its proposed land-use plan for 1.7 million acres and has reduced the number it will designate for oil and gas drilling. The BLM had originally proposed prohibiting drilling on only about 65,000 acres. Now it would close about 187,000 acres to oil and gas exploration.

It would have been difficult to ignore the outcry. Comments flooded the Vernal BLM office from environmental groups and citizens who didn't want to see the area completely torn up by energy development.

The BLM's decision to limit drilling is the good news about the management plan that will decide the fate of the area for decades to come. The bad news is the accommodation made to off-highway vehicle users. While the BLM says it wants to limit OHVs to trails designated by the federal land management agency, it would also allow the "all-terrain" vehicles to veer off for 300 feet on each side of the trail.

That rule would invite plunder by off-roaders, some of whom need no invitation to take their vehicles through terrain that is too fragile for such abuse. Given the BLM's inadequate funding for enforcement, allowing OHVs that kind of latitude would simply give their drivers carte blanche to ride anywhere the

four-wheelers or motorcycles can go, causing erosion, destroying plant life, harassing wildlife and contaminating creeks and streams.

Motorized vehicles not only degrade the environment, but ruin the outdoor experience for quiet recreationists - hikers, backpackers, horseback riders and mountain bikers. The BLM's mission is to manage public lands for multiple uses, not to create a playground for one group at the expense of others and the environment.

The BLM lands border the Northern Ute reservation and U.S. Forest Service wilderness areas, which contain archaeological treasures and pristine forests.

Protests to the revised plan can be sent to the BLM during the coming 30 days. To read the full report and learn how to protest, go to www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/info/newsroom/2008/august/vernal_field_office.html

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