What/Where is Otero Mesa?

Otero Mesa is 40 miles northeast of El Paso and includes approximately 600,000 acres of intact desert grassland—one of the largest surviving remnants of the vast grasslands that once covered the region.

Otero Mesa is mostly public land managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with some State and private holdings. There are few roads and no towns, but abundant opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Why is Otero Mesa important?

As one of the largest and wildest desert grasslands in North America, Otero Mesa is home to many species of plants and animals.

Otero Mesa supports one of New Mexico’s only native herds of pronghorn, as well as prairie dogs, burrowing owls, kit foxes, mule deer, and numerous reptiles and amphibians.

It is used by more than 200 bird species, including endangered Aplomado falcons.

Otero Mesa has been used by Native American tribes for centuries, and contains numerous petroglyphs and archaeological sites.
The threat of drilling

Most of Otero Mesa is open to oil and gas leasing. Oil and gas development is damaging to the environment at every stage, from exploration to full production.

The BLM estimates that oil and gas development would result in 350 miles of new roads being built on Otero Mesa over 20 years, creating a spiderweb of roads that would fragment habitat for wildlife.

Development will lead to the conversion of Otero Mesa’s grassland to a shrub-dominated landscape and the decline or disappearance of grassland associated wildlife species.

Otero Mesa is also threatened by hardrock mining. Exploratory mines have been drilled in the Cornudas Mountains.

Is it worth it?

Drilling for oil and gas on Otero Mesa will do little to solve our nation’s energy needs. The most optimistic estimate of the amount of natural gas beneath Otero Mesa is 1 trillion cubic feet. This may sound like a lot, but it is the equivalent of only 16 days of U.S. demand—a drop in the bucket.

Clean, renewable energy sources, like wind and solar, offer far more potential, with fewer impacts to wildlife, and without contributing to climate change.

Current Situation

Oil and gas leasing has been temporarily halted due to a 2009 court decision that directed BLM to redo its plan for leasing the area. Only Congress (through legislation) or the President (by declaring a national monument) can permanently protect this extraordinary landscape.

As an interim measure, conservationists are calling on Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell to put Otero Mesa off limits to new oil and gas leases for 20 years.

SWEC and other groups are also encouraging the Las Cruces District Office of the BLM to designate Otero Mesa as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) with restrictions on oil and gas leasing, mining, and off-road vehicle travel.

What You Can Do!

1) Write or call your Congressional representatives, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and NM Governor Susana Martinez. Let them know that protecting Otero Mesa is important to you. Urge them to take action to protect this special landscape.

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2) Donate money or time to the campaign to protect Otero Mesa. To learn more, go to wildmesquite.org.