

Petroleum Pipeline Threat to Wild Horses and Sage Grouse

Contributed by moth
13 June 2010

[Updated June 19 with related stories] Ken Salazar, Interior Secretary, has exposed his sullied hands in this scandal, brought to our attention by Culture Change correspondent moth. He knows intimately the sagebrush ecosystem and has been monitoring pipeline proposals and water issues in Nevada.

Why is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) forcibly removing Nevada's wild horses?
Is the reason the Ruby Pipeline connections?

The proposed pipeline for delivering natural gas from Wyoming to Malin, Oregon appears to be the primary motivating factor behind recent BLM decisions to forcibly remove wild horses from large parts of their habitat.

Am scrambling to try to get the BLM to delay the El Paso corporation's proposed Ruby Pipeline. This would cross sage grouse habitat -- an accident could really louse up some pristine watersheds. They are planning on beginning construction in July 2010 following BLM approval.

This is different from the other (water) pipeline from Snake Valley aquifers to Las Vegas. So now there are two pipelines to fight in Nevada!

The background-article below is a few months old, though remains relevant to the debates about risks posed by the proposed Ruby Pipeline. And the email address provided for comments should still be effective.

There's more going on that the obvious threat to wild horses, sage grouse and other species of the sage highlands, from this natural gas pipeline: the recent explosion of a natural gas pipeline near Dallas, Texas should remind us of our wisdom in rushing to dig another pipeline through pristine habitat. A few short term jobs do not justify the long term destruction of the sage ecosystems.

The Real Reason Behind BLM's Push to Remove Wild Horses: Is Ruby Pipeline the Smoking Gun?

Wild horse advocates question pipeline's involvement in massive removals of wild horses on public land.

Denver, CO (January 7, 2010) - The Cloud Foundation asks the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to reveal the truth behind removing healthy wild horses from the Calico Complex of northwestern Nevada. It does not appear to be coincidental that the multi-billion dollar corporate project, the Ruby Pipeline, would run through the Calico Complex -- site of the controversial roundup of more than 2,500 mustangs and the Buckhorn Wild Horse Herd Management Area. BLM removed over 200 wild horses at Buckhorn in December

2009 without public notice.

Director of the Interior, Ken Salazar, has told members of the public that the horses will starve if not removed because there is nothing for them to eat. The Director of the BLM, Bob Abbey, also supported Salazar's claim when he stated this week that horses are being removed "to restore an ecological balance" even though this claim is nullified by numerous experts including a biodiversity science specialist with 8 years experience in the range, and the sworn testimony of BLM employees Eckel and Drake. Abbey went on to reassert the BLM policy position that "we will need to continue removing excess wild horses from the public rangelands in areas where the land can no longer support them."

Yet, documents recently received by The Cloud Foundation from biologist Katie Fite of Western Watersheds and researcher Cindy MacDonald (publisher of the American Herds blog) today expose what may be the real reasons behind the massive, dead of winter wild horse roundups -- and they have nothing to do with horse or rangeland health -- but may have everything to do with the Ruby Pipeline.

In a written response to questions posed by the Office of Energy Projects (an agency within the Department of Energy), a Ruby natural gas pipeline project consultant, Dan Gredvig, stated that "Ruby will work with BLM to minimize wild horse and burro grazing along the restored ROW (right-of-way) for three years. Possible management actions would be to... reduce wild horse populations following BLM policy in appropriate management areas. BLM wild horse and burro specialists were consulted in developing this management approach." The document is dated February 23, 2009.

It appears that the public's wild horses are being removed at taxpayer expense on publicly owned land to make way for a multi-billion dollar pipeline constructed by El Paso Natural Gas Corporation of Colorado Springs, Colorado. Natural gas and water would ultimately provide added resources to California and other destinations. Given these new revelations, the public has the right to ask several key questions and get immediate answers to them: 1) Who really stands to profit from removing wild horses from public lands? 2) What private contractors, possible politicians, and/or agency bureaucrats stand to benefit from the yet undisclosed details of the Ruby Project? 3) Why has the public been excluded from any discussion of this undisclosed use of taxpayer public lands?

"I don't think it is out of line to seek immediate responses to these questions. The public has a right to know what is happening to their public lands and to the future of their wild horses, especially when it comes at taxpayer expense," said Ginger Kathrens, Volunteer Executive Director, The Cloud Foundation (named for the famous wild horse Kathrens has documented for the PBS/Nature television series).

According to a Western Watersheds report this is the largest project of its type across significant public lands in the American West in recent

memory. Ruby has seized upon a sliver of ecologically critical unprotected public wild land to punch a new corridor through, and bisect this irreplaceable landscape, including many of the last viable herds of wild horses in the West.

“The roundups in the Ruby Pipeline zone are questionable,” states Katie Fite, biologist and biodiversity specialist. “The public is not being told the truth. There needs to be an investigation within all levels of BLM considering the unavoidable damage to our public lands. There is no mitigation provided for to restore this biologically wild, remote, and untrammled landscape in northwestern Nevada and southeastern Oregon.”

Wild horse advocates and concerned Colorado citizens will be gathering to protest in downtown Denver on Thursday January 7 from 12:00-2:00pm in front of Senator Mark Udall's office building (999 Eighteenth Street, North Tower). Kathrens will address the crowd and press at noon. The group will be asking the Senator to help halt the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) massive roundup of wild horses currently living in the half million acre Calico Mountain Complex area in NW Nevada.

The above article is found here:
thecloudfoundation.org

Other details on Ruby Pipeline's ecological impacts:
nevada.sierraclub.org

Toiyabe Chapter Sierra Club asks FERC for a rehearing, gives reasons why they support the "no action" option, as in build no pipeline!

The Ruby Pipeline proposed route crosses critical habitat in many places in Nevada and especially in the northeast and northwest portions. Further, the pipeline goes cross-country and does not follow existing roads or established utility corridors. It would create a new corridor in currently wild and open lands throughout Nevada where most access is via jeep trails or, at best, dirt roads.

Ruby Pipeline, LLC, could not have picked an environmentally worse route across Nevada than the proposed route.

The Sierra Club submitted its comments on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) draft Environmental Impact Statement August 7, 2009. The Chapter strongly supported the no action alternative and opposed the proposed route because it would permanently destroy pristine sagebrush ecosystems. Comments on the disappointing final EIS were submitted on February 15, 2010.

The proposed pipeline route would cross critical wildlife and wild lands on the southern boundary of the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in

northwestern Nevada, cut through a portion of the Black Rock High Rock Emigrant Trail National Conservation Area and border the Summit Lake Paiute Reservation in northwestern Nevada. Comments on the inadequate mitigation plan and voluntary conservation agreements not made public until mid-December were filed with FERC on February 3, 2010."

People can still contact the BLM and ask them to delay the Ruby Pipeline project for at least one year until further studies can show an actual need for increased natural gas demand and also effective mitigation measures for all the miles of habitat the pipeline construction will destroy in the excavation process.

Wouldn't most people prefer the labor resources used for more appropriate projects like local biomethane anaerobic digesters for each community, county and town that requests it? This is the true path to sustainability and energy independence, otherwise the pipeline owners will decide how much to charge for their natural gas depending on what they can get for it. Natural gas remains financially unreliable and physically unstable. Biomethane would result in more permanent jobs than the short term jobs of the Ruby Pipeline.

Alternative energy resource:
biomethane.com

Sample letter to BLM

Here's a quick note to the BLM in Nevada asking them to delay the proposed Ruby Pipeline for at least one year until some other options can be considered:

Greetings,

I am writing as a last minute request that the BLM decide to delay the proposed Ruby Pipeline Project. There are several reasons the BLM should delay this project until effective mitigation can be achieved. Furthermore, a demand needs to exist for justification of such expenditures!

Several indigenous nations residing within Nevada have voiced strong objections to the Ruby Pipeline's current route. The Summit Lake Paiute objected to the disruption of their home, as the pipeline crosses several of their sacred sites.

From an environmental perspective, the Ruby Pipeline's proposed route is cutting directly through some of the last pristine habitat for the

sage grouse. The sage grouse leks (a lek is an open area that sage grouse males use for their display dances for courting females, a performance of much wing flapping and puffing out of yellow throat sacs) would be negatively effected by pipeline construction, and there is no effective mitigation supplied in their EIR to alleviate the loss of habitat.

The forced removal of wild horses by BLM order appears to be in direct correlation with the pipeline construction's start date of July 2010. This rush by El Paso corporation to dig the trench appears suspect also. Was the quick removal of the wild horses by the BLM done to meet certain objectives and avoid any further potential delays for El Paso corporation?

The proposed Ruby Pipeline route also crosses near several watersheds, including Thousand Spring Creek in Elko County. In 2008 a 6.0 magnitude earthquake occurred only 14 miles from the pipeline's proposed crossing at HD Summit north of Wells on the 93 Highway. What would happen if another earthquake ruptured the pipeline near the headwaters of Thousand Springs Creek? This and many other potential disasters are unaddressed in the EIS. Following recent oil spill in the Gulf and the recent natural gas line explosion in Dallas, TX, it seems that we would be better off following the precautionary principle and go back to the drawing board to try some better planning.

I am strongly urging the BLM to consider delaying the proposed Ruby Pipeline project for at least one year's time to consider other options.

Thank you for your concern,
[signed, with address]

Please send your letter via email to
nvsoweb [at] nv.blm.gov

Ask for one year's delay!

* * * * *

Related Reading:

Utah Oil Pipeline of Chevron Bursts, Oiling Birds

"...Chevron shut down the pipeline just before 8 a.m. after the Fire Department notified the company of the spill.

By then, oil had reached Liberty Park's pond, drenching Canada geese and Mallard ducks. At least 150 birds were rescued from the pond and taken to Hogle Zoo to be cleaned. Some were goslings and chicks as young as a week old.

Birds were cleaned up to three times in "kiddie pools" with water and Dawn dish soap, said Nancy Carpenter, director of the zoo's animal health services. The birds will be released at a new location by state wildlife workers."

For full story go to
sltrib.com

Sage grouse mating habits:

Prairie chickens also mate this way. This is from an online encyclopedia:

"Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) are large, chicken-like birds found in sagebrush habitats in the western United States. They are the largest North American grouse – males weigh up to 7 lbs – and are known for the impressive aggregations of displaying males at traditional mating sites (leks). Recently, the decline of these charismatic birds has been associated with the loss or degradation of sagebrush habitats.

Sage-grouse are grayish-brown with dark bellies and long, pointed tails. Males have black throats and white breasts, while females have white throats and grayish-brown breasts. Males are also about twenty-five percent longer than females and roughly twice as heavy.

These birds are closely associated with sagebrush species (genus *Artemisia*), which they require for food and cover. Unlike other chicken-like birds, they lack muscular gizzards for grinding hard items, so they must eat relatively soft foods. In winter they eat almost entirely sagebrush leaves. Breeding hens and chicks eat many non-woody plants and insects, and, in summer, hens may seek out relatively moist habitats that provide an abundance of these foods.

The species is found in the northern two thirds of Nevada and is most common in the northern and east-central parts of the state. Recent studies show that the population of sage-grouse found in Lyon County and adjacent eastern California is genetically distinct from all other populations of the species, although this population may not be distinct enough in other ways to warrant recognition as a separate species.

Greater Sage-Grouse mate on leks, which are open sites away from nesting areas where males congregate year after year to court females. Leks monitored in Nevada from 2000 to 2003 averaged fifteen males each, but the largest leks can have hundreds of males. As with other lekking species, Greater Sage-Grouse males do not provide any parental care; females mate on the lek and then leave to nest and raise the young on their own.

Male Sage-Grouse perform their striking displays on leks from late winter through spring, with most of the activity occurring around sunrise each day. In displaying, a male erects dark plumes on the top of his head, forms a fan with his long, pointed tail feathers (in the manner of a peacock) and inflates a pair of yellow air sacs, which protrude conspicuously through the breast feathers during the display. He then throws his head back rapidly while deflating the air sacs, producing a low-pitched "plopping" sound. Females choose mates based on several criteria, including the quality of the "plopping." A few males obtain almost all the mates, and most males on a lek never mate at all in a given year.

Before the late 1800s, Greater Sage-Grouse were much more widespread and abundant than they are now; for instance, a report from Wyoming in 1886 describes flights of thousands of sage-grouse, a description that would not apply anywhere today. In the last forty years, censuses at leks have documented an overall decline of about fifty percent. Sage-grouse numbers in Nevada have decreased over this period, although apparently not as drastically as for the species as a whole. The decline has been attributed to (1) habitat destruction by conversion to agricultural land; (2) habitat degradation due to grazing, human-caused changes in the frequency and intensity of fires and associated increases in invasive plants; and (3) hunting and poaching. For many people concerned with the preservation of natural environments, the decline of the Greater Sage-Grouse has come to symbolize the loss and degradation of sagebrush habitats."

Here's the link to the encyclopedia:
onlinenevada.org