

**October 25, 2004****EDITORIAL**

## Rocky Mountain Politics

**I**nterior Secretary Gale Norton has moved aggressively to open up the public lands for oil and gas production, just as Vice President Dick Cheney asked her to do in his 2001 energy report - 6,000 drilling permits in the last fiscal year alone, an all-time record. And while much of this has been unobjectionable, Ms. Norton has not been at all shy about invading environmentally sensitive landscapes that her predecessor, Bruce Babbitt, would almost surely have let alone.

In recent weeks, however, controversial plans for new drilling in areas of great importance not only to environmentalists but to hunters and anglers who form part of President Bush's core constituency have been shelved until after the election. These include proposals to open up thousands of acres of the fragile Otero Mesa in New Mexico, big chunks of the Roan Plateau in Colorado and the Green River Basin in Wyoming, an already heavily exploited region rich in wildlife and natural gas. (No similar reprieve was granted to Utah, where 40,000 acres were recently auctioned off as part of the Interior Department's colonizing of Utah lands that Mr. Babbitt had protected as potential wilderness.)

The biggest news came from Montana, where the Interior Department recently announced that it was dropping a proposal for drilling along parts of the Rocky Mountain Front. This was not a tough call, even for an administration seemingly bent on extracting every last drop from the Western landscape. The Front is revered by sports enthusiasts; its petroleum reserves are trivial. Still, the administration made a big deal of the announcement, dispatching an assistant secretary all the way to Billings instead of releasing the usual handout from the Bureau of Land Management.

We'd like to think that these bits and pieces add up to a change of heart. The rural West is stressed enough as it is. Fully 85 percent of the oil and gas reserves on public land are already open for leasing and development. Is it possible that Ms. Norton is willing to leave untouched the scraps that remain? Possible, but unlikely. What we are seeing has the look of a classic political tease, aimed in this case at up-for-grabs states like New Mexico - a tease that would be replaced after Nov. 2 by the sterner reality of a policy that says there is no energy crisis we cannot drill our way out of.