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GAO: More research needed on oil shale, water

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By CATHERINE TSAI - Associated Press writer trib.com | Posted: Tuesday, November 30, 2010 12:00 am | No Comments Posted

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DENVER -- Scarce water resources could limit the growth of oil shale development in the West, the Government Accountability Office said in a report released Monday.

Oil shale deposits in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming hold an estimated 1.5 trillion barrels of recoverable oil, but companies are still trying to find commercially viable ways to extract it.

Oil shale development could have "significant" impacts on water quality and availability, but the exact effects are unclear, partly because what's known about current water conditions is limited and processes for extracting oil are still being researched, the GAO said.

The GAO urged the Interior Department to figure out the baseline conditions for water resources in the Piceance and Uintah Basins in Colorado and Utah and to coordinate research by other agencies. It also recommended modeling regional groundwater movement to help understand how possible contaminants from oil shale development might travel.

Past studies indicate one to 12 barrels of water, or up to about 500 gallons, may be needed to produce a barrel of oil, though the average for in-situ oil shale production is estimated at five barrels of water, the report said.

Climate change, increasing demand for water from cities and industry, interstate water compacts, and

needs of threatened and endangered species in the West all could limit how much water is available for oil shale development, the GAO said.

Based on the average estimates of water use, the oil shale industry might need more water per year than is used by the Denver metro area annually, said David Abelson, oil shale policy adviser for the conservation group Western Resource Advocates.

"There's going to be less and less new water to appropriate. Use conflicts throughout Colorado, throughout Utah, are only going to increase," Abelson said. "The question is, where is the water going to come from and at what expense."

Company representatives with oil shale interests said they were confident they have enough water rights or could obtain them to support at least initial operations, the GAO report said.

Colorado officials said companies can apply for additional water rights in the Piceance Basin, and Utah officials said companies could buy water rights from other users.

AuraSource Inc. Chief Financial Officer Eric Stoppenhagen said different processes for extracting petroleum from oil shale use different amounts of water. He declined to discuss his company's water resources but said it is something it will address as it applies for an oil shale research lease with the Bureau of Land Management for land in Uintah County, Utah.

"The overdevelopment of any resource can lead to environmental problems," he said in an e-mail. "This is a concern of ours as well as of state and federal governments, local landowners and agriculture. The process instituted by the BLM addresses the concern over the impact on the quality and quantity of water resources." He said his company would work with stakeholders to address environmental concerns.

Bob Elderkin, speaking for the Colorado Wildlife Federation, said oil shale research from the 1970s shows that impacts on water quality remain a concern.

"We should understand what the impacts on water quality are before we even consider the idea of commercially developing oil shale," Abelson said.

On the Web:

GAO report: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1135.pdf>

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