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Op-ed: Oil shale forces Utah to decide its real water priorities

BY BILL MIDCAP

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Oil shale is once again in the news with Chevron's recent admission in a court filing that development activities would require substantial quantities of water. As ranchers and farmers who rely on our western lands and access to clean, reliable supplies of water, the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union is committed to ensuring that development activities protect our water supplies that sustain our rural economies.

Our organization represents more than 22,000 family farmers and ranchers in Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. Sustainable, diverse communities are the foundation of our western heritage. To continue to thrive and to produce food for our communities and our country, we need access to clean water supplies. Most of our members have worked these lands for generations, and our ongoing success depends on balanced access to our natural resources.



Bill Midcap.
Courtesy photo

That ethic of responsibility and the conservation of our western water is why we support the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) "research-first" approach to oil shale development. This policy reflects prudent, measured steps to ensure that the federal leasing program protects our western values.

Perhaps the biggest risk to our families and communities from oil shale development would be the diversion of substantial amounts of water. Such demand would threaten our way of life and undermine the foundation of our communities.

Rivers like the Colorado River are already over-allocated, but demand for water continues to grow. We cannot supply what we already know we will need, let alone address a big new demand like the one that oil shale brings to the table. Energy companies will have only one place to turn to acquire new water rights: farmers and ranchers.

That is not in our nation's or our communities' economic interest. We all need to grasp that what hurts farmers and ranchers hurts the region. Agriculture is a keystone of the regional economy, an economic driver that is perennial and sustainable, not a boomtown bubble. And water is the key to agriculture. Appropriation and diversion by oil interests of the water supplies crucial to crops and herds would jeopardize our ability to produce food and threaten the jobs and economic activity that agriculture creates.

Prior to Chevron's admission, the oil industry claimed that new technologies would require substantially less water than the BLM projects, but offered no independently-verifiable data to support that proposition. Thanks to Chevron, we now have industry confirmation that development would use enormous quantities of water, and likely strain existing already overburdened water supplies. Because of the severe drought conditions the West has faced for the last few years, farmers have been forced to let fields go fallow due to lack of irrigation water, and ranchers have had to sell off cattle early in the season as the cost of feed climbed.

Protecting our water supplies is not our sole interest. We need to make sure that the oil shale industry pays its own way. Agriculture is vital to western economies, and there are real jobs at stake that could be greatly compromised and lost should local economies be required to subsidize oil shale development.

It is vitally important that we make sure as a matter of sound economics and equity that rural communities do not bear the disproportional impact of oil shale development.

Over the past few years, the BLM initiated a series of critical reforms that would force oil companies to prove they will not devastate water supplies. This policy is critical to ensuring additional resources are not squandered on costly oil shale speculation by ensuring that industry put its cards on the table and report on its actual water demands, just as Chevron had to do in its court filing.

Until this filing, Chevron, like others seeking to develop oil shale, downplayed its water requirements, even suggesting that it might produce more water than it consumes. We need an honest conversation to protect all stakeholders that rely on water from the Colorado River Basin. Chevron's legal filing and the reforms the BLM has initiated have

opened that door.

Bill Midcap is director of external affairs for Rocky Mountain Farmers Union.

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