

Chewing Up a Fragile Land

by Terry Tempest Williams

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CASTLE VALLEY, Utah — For many Americans, the Bush administration energy plan, developed by Vice President Dick Cheney with the help of a task force whose deliberations he will not reveal, is an abstraction at best, and at worst a secret. Here in the redrock desert of southern Utah, it is literally an earth-shaking reality.

Oil and gas exploration is going on in the form of seismic tests—conducted with what are called thumper trucks—in sensitive wildlands adjacent to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. Last Sunday, with a group of friends all deeply concerned about the fate of this landscape, one of America’s most treasured, I witnessed the destructive power of the thumper trucks on the fragile desert.

We had a Bureau of Land Management map showing the territory leased by Eclipse Exploration of Denver—23,000 acres elevated in priority for exploration and drilling under the Bush energy plan. We oriented ourselves from atop the sandstone cliffs above the Colorado River that overlook this pristine country of Entrada sandstone formations, pinyon and juniper forests, and fragile alkaline desert. It is one of the proposed preserves in America’s Redrock Wilderness bill now before Congress—and with significant support. If this bill were law, it would protect these lands from new leases for oil drilling and exploration.

Lines drawn on the map marked the physical corridors where four 50,000-pound trucks would crawl cross-country, tamping the desert for clues as to where oil might be found. As we set out to look for the trucks, our task was simplified by a helicopter flying overhead with a long cable carrying what appeared to be an enormous doughnut. It was a tire. We watched where it was dropped and hiked to the work site.

A thumper truck was stuck, tilted on its side, lodged precariously in the steep banks of a wash. Its rear left tire, as tall as the man staring at it, was not only flat but torn off its axle by an unseen boulder. Parked nearby was a white truck—the “smart box” where WesternGeco, the company contracted to do this preliminary work, records and compiles all the seismic information.

Three other thumper trucks were at work about half a mile ahead. Behind them was pulverized earth: a 15-foot swath of beaten down and broken junipers, blackbrush, rabbitbrush, squawbush and cliffrose. The delicate desert crust that holds the red sand in place from wind and erosion, known as cryptobiotic soil, was obliterated.

In January, Jayne Belnap, a United States Geological Survey expert on soil damage, submitted an official comment letter to the Bureau of Land Management about the fragility of desert crusts, warning it could take from 50 to 300 years for the dry soil to recover from the damage incurred by heavy equipment.

Up close, the thumper trucks creeping across the desert, following a path of fluorescent pink ribbons, looked like gigantic insects, gnawing and clawing, articulating right and left as they balanced themselves across the rugged terrain. Fumes from hydraulic fluid stung our eyes, and the noise threatened to blow out human eardrums. The men in the trucks were reading newspapers as the operation proceeded, computerized and routine.

At the designated stops, each truck in the convoy lowered a steel plate onto the desert, clamped tight, applied some 64,000 pounds of pressure against the sand and then sent a jolt of seismic waves below to record density. The ground went into a seizure. Sand flew and smoke obscured the horizon where Skyline Arch and Sand Dune Arch—the Windows section of Arches National Park—stand. We were only four miles from Delicate Arch, the redrock icon where a few weeks ago a Ute elder uttered prayers and passed the Winter Olympics torch to his granddaughter in the name of good will and peace. When the steel plate lifted, the once supple red sand had turned to concrete.

The trucks moved forward, post to post, now scraping sandstone with the chains around their tires, heading straight for a spring where 100-year-old cottonwood trees provided a rare canopy of shade alongside a creek. We ran ahead, not believing the trucks would force a road into this fragile desert oasis, but they did, gunning the gas, breaking down stands of squawbush and willows and ripping right on through the cottonwood shoots. There was nothing we could do but watch. This was our country's new energy plan, translated into action.

A manager from the Bureau of Land Management suddenly appeared, and I felt a flash of relief, thinking he had come to stop this sacrifice of wild country that might at best yield a tiny fraction of the supply of fuel this oil-hungry nation uses every year. He was perturbed, but not by the trucks plowing through the cottonwood wash. He had come to monitor us—the public, walking on public lands. The bureau had received a call, he told us, saying that we might be harassing the operation, putting the project at risk.

I should not have been surprised. I knew that a memorandum sent by the Bureau of Land and drilling, or when an application for permission to drill comes in the door, this work must be the number one priority.

We asked the land manager as politely as possible if he had the jurisdiction to redirect the thumper trucks from this riverbed to an already established seismic road to the south. "We've got the discretion to make them do that," he said. "But, in the end, it's all a trade-off. We've chosen to just accept the project as they give it to us." He paused. "You can see the pink ribbons on the trees," he said. "They've had it all staked out since September."