

As a direct result of our Religious Campaign for Wilderness statement on Otero Mesa, Catholic Bishop Ricardo Ramirez from Las Cruces, New Mexico, issued his own statement which was picked up by the Albuquerque Journal. See his statement below.

Albuquerque Journal

March 10, 2004

Editorial

Catholic Diocese Seeks Otero Protection

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces has asked Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., to help protect southern New Mexico's Otero Mesa from impacts of oil and gas drilling.

"Of particular concern is the sacrifice of long-term sustainability for short-term control of the limited gas resources of Otero Mesa," Bishop Ricardo Ramirez wrote recently to Domenici.

"A careful reflection and study of the profound moral messages of the Christian faith leads to an inescapable conclusion that a reorientation of our approach toward the environment is strongly needed," he wrote.

Domenici said he respects and appreciates the bishop's opinion. "The BLM, in my judgment, has reached a sound policy decision that appropriately balances the need to protect the area and still allow very limited exploration on the mesa."

The New Mexico Conference of Churches also has endorsed strong protections for Otero Mesa.

Faithful to Otero Mesa

A Catholic bishop urges protection of the land from drilling and a recognition of the environment's moral message

By the Rt. Rev. Ricardo Ramirez
March 8, 2004

I have watched with great interest the public debate over whether the publicly owned land known as Otero Mesa should be leased to private companies for the purpose of extracting natural gas.

I am informed that the Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency overseeing this land and entrusted with this stewardship, has recently released its final proposal to carry out this plan to drill for gas.

I must voice my deep concern and my wholehearted support for a long-term, conservation-focused plan that sustains the resources New Mexico is so blessed with and fortunate to enjoy.

It is my firm belief the protection and stewardship of our natural resources are important mandates for human society, and the management we do of our environment should be informed by the lessons of Christian doctrine. Several denominations have made important statements and written issue papers regarding environmental issues, including the protection of publicly owned lands.

In addition to the strong mandate for environmental protection that is clearly delineated in the Catholic tradition, the American Indian religions historically practiced and still practiced in some places today - including in New Mexico - carry a strong element of respect and reverence for the creation.

Significantly, Pope John Paul II has spoken to these issues frequently. In a 2001 address, the pope stated "The human creature receives a mission of governance over creation to make all of its potential shine. Unfortunately, if one casts a gaze over the regions of our planet, one notices immediately that humanity has not fulfilled the divine expectation.

"Especially in our times," the pope continued, "man has devastated without hesitation plains and forested valleys, polluted the waters, deformed the Earth's habitats, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydro-geological and atmospheric systems and turned green spaces into deserts."

In this and other cases, the Catholic faith and other traditions show our present management of our environment, focusing on short-term extraction of non-renewable resources at the long-term expense of other living creatures, is not in accordance with stewardship of the creation.

In recent years, a number of local and regional religious institutions have sought to apply these lessons to contemporary and controversial environmental issues. An assortment of resources can be used to reflect on the protection of the Otero Mesa, including the pastoral letter "Renewing the Earth" (1991) from the U.S. Catholic bishops; the pastoral letter "Partnership for the Future" (1998), issued by the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops; and the Columbia River Pastoral Letter, spearheaded by a number of Catholic bishops and archbishops to restore the imperiled salmon runs in the Northwest.

In addition, the New Mexico Council of Churches has already formally endorsed the protection of the Otero Mesa. It is my belief the same lessons reflected in such vigorous religious voices for the protection of the environment in other regions apply equally to the protection of Otero Mesa.

From my understanding of the activities envisioned in the proposal to extract natural gas from Otero Mesa, it is my belief such activities would not serve the best interests of New Mexico nor properly reflect the lessons of stewardship and reverence detailed in Scripture. Of particular concern is the sacrifice of long-term sustainability for short-term control of the limited gas resources of Otero Mesa.

The ongoing controversy regarding environmental issues in general, and public lands in particular, is an issue of which I am acutely aware, and I doubt such controversy will recede in the near future. However, I reiterate that a careful reflection and study of the profound moral messages of the Christian faith leads to an inescapable conclusion that a reorientation of our approach toward the environment is strongly needed. Far too often, the lessons of Scripture relating to the "dominion" of humans over the creation have been misinterpreted as a free license to use the creation for only our own gain, with impunity toward other forms of life.

It is my hope that, with deeper reflection and more careful reading of Scripture in its proper context, human society might come to a more thorough and appropriate understanding of the need to protect our environment, including Otero Mesa. □

Ricardo Ramirez is bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces. This article is taken from a letter he wrote to U.S. Senator Pete Domenici, an Albuquerque Republican, asking the senator to exert "vigorous leadership" in protecting Otero Mesa and the environment