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Aspen Daily News, Volume 22, Number 17, July 17, 1999  — Cortez-area residents blast protection of
desert lands [ARTICLE]

Cortez-area residents blast protection of desert lands

From The Associated Press

CORTEZ — Ranchers and others who use public lands are as important as the artifacts and ancient ruins federal officials want to protect in southwestern Colorado, area residents say.

About 100 residents attended a hearing Wednesday, many of them with questions or complaints about the proposal by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt for stronger safeguards on 160,000 acres of public land.

Babbitt, who visited the area in May, has said oil and gas production and livestock grazing shouldn't interfere with those plans. But some people at the meeting organized in Cortez by the Bureau of Land Management said those "living on the land now are cultural resources," too.

Some area residents fear greater protection will mean restrictions on livestock grazing, recreation and other activities.

The Interior Department temporarily banned some types of mining on the Bureau Land of Management lands, but said oil and gas production shouldn't be hindered. The agency has said federal action could include making the area a national monument or conservation site.

The area includes 20,000 known sites of Ancestral Puebloan settlement. The prehistoric Indians' well-preserved past has made neighboring Mesa Verde National Park an international tourist destination.

The Indians, until recently, were usually called Anasazi, a Navajo word usually interpreted to mean "Ancient Ones." Much of the Yellow Jacket Canyon area in Montezuma and Dolores counties boasts of 100 Ancestral Puebloan sites per square mile, according to Bureau of Land Management estimates.

The area also corresponds to a massive geological formation, the McElmo Dome, where extensive production of carbon dioxide and natural gas been compatible with preservation of cultural resources,

**MONTROSE-based BLM regional manager
Mark Stiles said Thursday.
More public hearings are planned.**