Back in 2005, a Rand report assessed the merits of pursuing oil shale (a rock formation particularly prevalent in the U.S.) as an option for extracting liquid transportation fuel. The authors said:
"Heating oil shale for retorting, whether above ground or in situ, requires significant energy inputs. Over at least the next few decades, this energy will be supplied by fossil fuels… As a result, the production of petroleum products derived from oil shale will entail significantly higher emissions of carbon dioxide, compared with conventional crude oil production and refining. In addition, the high temperatures associated with surface retorting can cause a release of carbon dioxide from mineral carbonates contained in oil shale."

I bring this up in light of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's announcement, yesterday, that Interior is "offering additional opportunities for energy companies to conduct oil shale research, development and demonstration (RD&D) projects on public lands in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming."

The Secretary acknowledges the underlying concerns: ""If we are to succeed in unlocking oil shale's great potential, we must first answer fundamental questions about water use, power use, and environmental and social impacts of commercial-scale development. With this new round of RD&D leases, we hope to move closer to responsibly and sustainably developing our oil shale resources."

There are enormous questions as to whether the nation can have its shale cake and eat it, too. Can oil shale development be sustainable, in any sense of the word? Can we encourage a new type of fossil fuel production (one that starts out with the promise of higher-than-usual carbon emissions) at the same time the nation seeks to dramatically reduce releases of greenhouse gas? And as Interior lets the site exploration genie a little further out of the bottle, can it restrain development, regardless of its sustainability?

Stay tuned.