

# Upper Green River Valley Coalition

## Lessons from Jonah

### *The Big Fish That Swallowed the Upper Green?*

One of the country's most significant energy discoveries in recent times, the Jonah Field offers important lessons in how industrial uses can come to monopolize public land. What started as ambitious proposal to drill 500 natural gas wells over 15 to 20 years in 1998 has become a juggernaut, with the Bureau of Land Management's recent approval for industry to drill 3,100 new wells, causing surface disturbance on two-thirds of the 30,000-acre project area. The Jonah Infill threatens to displace wildlife and cattle operations and add to the "brown cloud" that now looms over the Pinedale area thanks to rampant energy development in Wyoming's Upper Green River Valley, which once boasted the nation's cleanest air. The scale of this project is now seven times greater than initially approved, expected to produce \$30 billion in natural gas. Jonah's lessons must be heeded if we are to ensure that more recent projects, such as the Pinedale Anticline, proceed in a balanced and responsible manner.

#### **Lesson One: BLM underestimates the scale and pace of oil and gas development.**

In 1998, the BLM approved full-field development for the Jonah, assuming the following scenario in its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS):

- One well per pad with an estimated 2.5 acres of direct surface disturbance/pad.
- Total surface disturbance, including pads, roads, pipelines and infrastructure, was to be less than 3,000 acres.
- Maximum well density would be 80-acre spacing.
- Operators stated that less than 500 wells would be required for full extraction, to be drilled over 10 to 15 years, for a total field lifetime of 40 to 50 years.

In 2003:

- After only five years, more than 500 wells are in place in Jonah.
- BLM raises the estimate of surface disturbance to 4,225 acres for the original 497 wells.
- Nitrous oxide emissions from diesel exhaust are six to eight times the amounts predicted.<sup>1</sup>

Today:

- The BLM has authorized 3,100 new wells, increasing well density to 10-acre spacing.
- Industry may drill up to 250 wells a year, more than double the current rate of drilling in the Jonah, despite Forest Service request for phasing development to safeguard air quality.
- The infill will result in a total surface disturbance of 20,000 acres, or nearly two-thirds of the project area. More than 465 miles of new roads will be built.

#### **Lesson Two: Rampant drilling fouls the air.**

Drilling has progressed at nearly four times the rate predicted in both the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline, and accordingly emissions of air pollutants far exceed the levels analyzed. Now BLM has authorized a doubling of Jonah's already rampant rate drilling, but without requiring the use of the cleanest technology. Here's what to expect, according to the Infill EIS:

- Decreasing visibility and obscure views, not just in Pinedale, but in national parks and Wilderness areas;
- Acidification of mountain lakes, which will harm prized trout fisheries and delicate aquatic ecosystems;
- Ozone and particulate matter levels in the gas field approaching thresholds set to protect human health.

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<sup>1</sup> Greater Yellowstone Area Air Quality Assessment Update, April 2005.

### **Lesson Three: Full-field development = single use of public lands.**

The incremental conversion of the Jonah field into an industrial zone occurred in direct opposition to BLM's mandate to manage public lands for multiple-use. Wildlife habitat, cattle grazing and public access are all being sacrificed. Consider:

- As a result of the Jonah Infill, tens of thousands of acres of public land will end up laced with roads, utility lines and tightly spaced well pads.
- A leaked memo suggested closing Jonah to the public because its air will be so toxic.
- Ongoing studies in the Upper Green show that mule deer and pronghorn avoid the gas fields, and implicate oil and gas activity in the alarming drop-off in wintering deer.

Specific impacts to wildlife include:

- ✓ Increased wildlife mortality from vehicle collisions, road, pipeline and well-pad construction, and exposure to toxic compounds.
- ✓ Fragmentation and loss of effective habitat.
- ✓ Displacement of wildlife from noise, dust and human presence.
- ✓ Increased poaching pressure.



Jonah Field, June 2002 (Peter Aengst, TWS)

### **Lesson Four: Energy development causes significant and widespread impacts.**

The Jonah's indirect impacts go far beyond the gas field, extending across the region. These impacts include:

- Dirty air in national parks and Wilderness, with acid deposition in mountain lakes.
- Spread of noxious weeds.
- Fragmentation of wildlife habitat.
- Water pollution from hydraulic fracturing and disposal of drilling fluids.
- Noise and light pollution, as well as a perceived loss of "open space."
- Stressed social services and infrastructure in Sublette County.

**Conclusion:** While the amount of natural gas extracted from the Jonah field is truly impressive, so are the impacts to these public lands. Jonah clearly shows the need for careful planning and more effective management by the BLM so that other gas fields develop at a pace and scale more in balance with other values. Wyoming's Upper Green certainly can't endure another Jonah-type field with its whale-size impacts.

**For more information:** see [www.uppergreen.org](http://www.uppergreen.org), or contact

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