

Upper Green River Valley Coalition

Conserving Wyoming's Heritage

How to balance natural gas development and nature in the South Piney Coalbed Methane Project Area

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is in the process of authorizing the first coalbed methane gas field in Wyoming's Upper Green River Valley, an area already hard hit with booming energy development. A coalition of conservation groups and citizens has crafted the Conserving Wyoming's Heritage (CWH) alternative as a constructive approach for balancing the interests of the natural gas industry and protection of the land in the South Piney coalbed methane project area. You will have an opportunity to voice your concerns when BLM opens a public comment period for the South Piney project in the fall of 2004.

BACKGROUND

This 31,230-acre gas field just west of Big Piney is where Infinity Oil and Gas Inc. and Williams Production RMT Co. plan to employ a controversial technique of tapping gas trapped in coal deposits by removing vast quantities of groundwater. This area, in the eastern foothills of the Wyoming Range near Big Piney, harbors crucial habitat for northwest Wyoming's legendary herds of big game. It is also an area with impressive springs and wetlands used today by ranching operations. **The Conserving Wyoming's Heritage Citizens Alternative**, submitted to the BLM by the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, seeks to protect South Piney's residents, ranchers, wildlife and natural values without stopping industry's ability to tap the natural gas.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE CONSERVING WYOMING'S HERITAGE ALTERNATIVE

This conservation-oriented proposal advances three central tenets:

1. Coalbed methane development must be guided by a thorough study of this technology's serious impacts on land, air and water quality and wildlife habitat;
2. Reclamation of disturbed land and water resources must be complete and must be an ongoing process that is not put off until the end of well operations;
3. There must be opportunities for full public participation in the well-permitting process, with special emphasis given to protecting the rights of "split estate" owners.

These principles mirror those in the "Responsible Energy Development" proposal which the Upper Green River Valley Coalition submitted to help guide the BLM in its ongoing revision of the Resource Management Plan for the Pinedale area (see: www.uppergreen.org). Both urge:

- Phased development so that impacts do not occur all at once.
- Clustered development of roads, pipelines, powerlines, compressor stations, well pads and other infrastructure.
- Best management practices that minimize impacts.
- Adaptive management to modify well operations as new information and technologies become available.

BENEFITS OF THE CONSERVING WYOMING'S HERITAGE ALTERNATIVE

Landowners in the South Piney project area would receive the following protections:

- Sufficient bonding on each gas well to ensure full protection of landowner rights.
- Full reclamation to pre-development conditions of both surface and subsurface resources, such as soils, vegetation, water resources, eradication of weeds, and obliteration of unneeded roads and well pads.
- At least 30 days notice and an opportunity to comment on environmental analyses for wells. BLM would notify split-estate owners of their rights relative to bonds as well as appeals if bonds are insufficient.

Because coalbed methane wells affect surface water quality and the integrity of underground aquifers, they can pose serious environmental threats if not properly managed. The Conserving Wyoming's Heritage alternative urges these measures to safeguard South Piney's impressive natural values:

- BLM would monitor impacts to big game and other wildlife from altered stream flows, roads and increased traffic, overhead powerlines, holding ponds, compressor station noise and other effects of industry. The agency would restrict the timing and location of development to protect wildlife.
- There will be sufficient monitoring and baseline data to document changes in the quantity or quality of spring flows, drinking water sources and other water resources.
- Water produced from CBM drilling would be re-injected into the ground in a quality and in a manner that would make it available for future use.
- A detailed water-management plan would be required to protect surface and subsurface waters, including downstream water uses.
- Operators would be required to enter into written agreements with water well owners within a 3-mile radius.
- Air pollutants would be carefully monitored and steps would be required to mitigate documented degradation in air quality.
- BLM would be required to protect the striking views in the South Piney area by taking steps to reduce the haze generated by CBM development.

HELP PROMOTE THIS COMMON SENSE AND BALANCED ALTERNATIVE

We hope you too will ask the BLM to consider adopting the Conserving Wyoming's Heritage alternative as it prepares a Draft Environmental Impact Statement on industry's proposal to drill up to 210 coalbed methane wells in the South Piney area. This draft is due out in the fall of 2004, triggering a public comment opportunity. The alternative's measures are realistic and achievable, but only if citizens insist on them.

MORE INFORMATION:

- You can obtain a copy of the Conserving Wyoming's Heritage alternative at www.uppergreen.org.
- To get on the BLM's mailing list write for the South Piney EIS:
BLM, Pinedale Field Office, P.O. Box 768, Pinedale, WY, 82941. Or: pinedale_wymail@blm.gov.
- Visit BLM's South Piney project website at: www.wy.blm.gov/nepa/pfodocs/southpiney/index.htm
- Contact Upper Green River Valley Coalition: (www.uppergreen.org)
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