

Upper Green River Valley Coalition

BLM plans to open South Piney to Drilling *Western Wyoming's first major coalbed methane development could come to the Upper Green River Valley*

Two energy-exploration companies have proposed developing western Wyoming's first coalbed methane field, the "South Piney Natural Gas Project," 12 miles west of Big Piney in the Upper Green River Valley. The project would entail drilling up to 210 wells, as well as constructing roads, pipelines and production facilities. The 49-square-mile project area is highly sensitive, containing many springs and seeps, wetlands, aspen parklands, and important wildlife habitat for elk, moose, sage grouse and mule deer. It provides the only winter range in the valley used by elk outside controversial feedgrounds. The Bureau of Land Management is conducting an environmental review with a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and public comment opportunity scheduled for fall 2004.

BACKGROUND:

The Upper Green River Valley is undergoing a major natural gas drilling boom with thousands of new wells drilled in the past decade and thousands more on the way. This intense development has targeted deep "tight sands" natural gas. The South Piney proposal would be the first gas project in the valley to drill for coalbed methane, a form of natural gas trapped under groundwater in coal seams. To release the gas, vast quantities of water are pumped to the surface, posing serious environmental risks both above and below ground.

The land in the 31,230-acre South Piney project area is owned as follows:

- The BLM administers 15,440 acres (50 percent) in which the federal government owns both the surface and mineral resources.
- The state of Wyoming owns 1,760 acres (5.6 percent).
- Private parties own 14,030 surface acres, with 11,413 acres (36.5 percent) of that in "split estates" where the federal government owns the mineral rights.

Infinity Oil & Gas and Williams Production RMT Co. propose to drill into coal seams in the Mesaverde and Frontier formations with 100 to 210 wells. These initial wells would be spaced one every 160 acres, or four wells per section. Infinity and Williams propose drilling an average of 30 wells per year for seven years. However, BLM's "reasonably foreseeable development" scenario for 1.2 million-acre Pinedale Resource Area envisions up to 600 coalbed methane wells around South Piney. Associated infrastructure includes:

- Separators, dehydrators and water-storage tanks for each well.
- Surface pumping units would be required to de-water the Mesaverde formation wells.
- Up to 20 central production facilities to collect and compress the gas, as well as for water collection and disposal.
- Roads, buried gas lines and pipelines to transport produced water.
- Up to 21 noisy compressor stations.
- Miles of electric transmission lines.

LESSONS FROM THE POWDER RIVER BASIN:

CBM development in the Powder River Basin in eastern Wyoming has been extremely controversial. These wells deplete aquifers that ranchers depend on as water sources. The “produced water” is often not re-injected; rather it is stored in surface ponds or is dumped into streams, many of which are ephemeral. This discharge has disrupted the hydrological and ecological characteristics of the area. Moreover, much of the produced water in the Powder River Basin is too salty for use in irrigation and can contaminate soils.

“This water flooded Spotted Horse Creek the entire winter of 2000/2001, icing over and flowing out on either side of our hay meadow, and destroying all the native vegetation that it reached. So much salt was deposited on the soil that nothing but weeds will grow. This past year we had an impressive crop of fireweed which is very salt tolerant, but which cattle will not eat. These were our best hay meadows. The worst tragedy for us was that CBM water drowned and killed over 200 of our beautiful 100-year-old cottonwood trees.”

Powder River rancher Marjorie West, U.S. Senate testimony March 2003.

Current test wells in the South Piney project area indicate that produced water is of such poor quality that Infinity volunteered to inject it back into the ground. The re-injection well failed, raising doubts whether re-injection will succeed in future attempts. BLM must ensure that re-injected water does not contaminate groundwater and surface water systems, such as aquifers, springs and seeps. Also, even with re-injection, there is a significant risk of altering the sub-surface hydrology that feeds important springs, creek, irrigation ditches, seeps and wetlands.

IMPACTS BEYOND WATER QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

Energy development could undermine elk populations that depend heavily on the South Piney area for winter range and calving; degrade air quality; affect historic properties, such as the Lander cutoff to the Oregon Trail, and recreation opportunities; fragment the open space and scenery that define the Upper Green; and further imperil sensitive species, such as sage grouse, cutthroat trout and raptors. Elsewhere in Wyoming, coalbed methane development has disrupted rural patterns of life in areas where the land surface above the gas deposits is privately owned by ranchers. Under current law, exploration companies may remove fences, cut roads and install infrastructure without regard to landowner wishes.

TIME TO GET INVOLVED:

The BLM’s environmental review will consider alternative ways to accommodate CBM development while protecting other resources and values. It is important that you become involved today in the South Piney CBM project and comment when the draft EIS is released this fall. Ask the BLM to fully evaluate directional drilling and not allow any surface development in sensitive parts of the South Piney project area. Demand that the agency protect the quality and flow of the area’s springs and seeps through such measures as re-injection, baseline and long-term monitoring and caps on the number and density of wells. To protect sensitive wildlife, strict limits should be imposed on when and where drilling occurs.

MORE INFORMATION:

- 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)
Linda Baker: 307- 367-3670, or lindab@wyoming.com
Lauren McKeever: 307-367-8472, or lauren@uppergreen.org