

Upper Green River Valley Coalition

South Piney: Not the Place for Another Gas Field

Site of coalbed methane proposal holds special natural values

South Piney, Fish and Middle Piney creeks

One of western Wyoming's undiscovered treasure lies within lands proposed for coalbed methane development on the hilly western fringe of the Upper Green River Valley. Healthy herds of elk, bands of bighorn sheep, moose and mule deer bucks find summer refuge here in the deep shade of the Wyoming Range foothills. This area supports cattle operations, world-class fly fishing and rare wildlife, such as black bears, wolves and the, elusive lynx. With only the wind for company, you can lose yourself in the nearby mountains, scouting waterfalls and wildflowers. The proposed 31,000-acre South Piney Natural Gas project area mingles with timbered slopes of the Bridger-Teton National Forest and harbors special natural and cultural values that demand consideration as the Bureau of Land Management considers a plan to drill up to 210 coalbed methane wells. This diverse area features sagebrush, grasslands, aspen-covered foothills and irrigated ranchland, all laced with willow bogs, trout-filled creeks and artesian springs.

◆ **WILDLIFE:** The South Piney/Middle Piney area provides important habitat for mule deer, moose and elk. Big-game species rely on these lands for crucial winter range, calving grounds and migration corridors, according to comments provided to BLM by Wyoming Game & Fish Department. Most significantly, South Piney harbors one of the valley's last natural elk winter ranges, lands that elk prefer to controversial feed grounds scattered around the valley. State game officials are concerned that development could displace the Piney elk herd from this important year-round range, possibly pushing them onto private ranch lands where they could damage fences and eat ranchers' hay. This area is also important habitat for sage grouse, a treasured game bird in decline across its range.

◆ **WATER:** South Piney's clear water, running off the Wyoming Range and through underground aquifers, is perhaps the area's most precious renewable resource – and the one most vulnerable to degradation. Coalbed methane extraction entails drawing water off aquifers. Proposed development calls for returning this saline water back into the ground, but there are doubts about the feasibility of re-injection. If re-injection fails, this water could be discharged it into surface streams, where it could damage riparian habitats and ranchers' livelihoods. Hundreds of artesian wells dot this area, surfacing near the base of cliffs. Potential CBM impacts on both underground and surface water resources could threaten the area's wildlife, fish and ranching heritage. Wyoming wildlife officials are particularly concerned with possible impacts to species of special concern, such as the boreal toad and Colorado River cutthroat trout. The South Piney watershed holds some 40 stream miles that support genetically pure populations of this disappearing native fish. Cutthroat subspecies are destined for listing under the Endangered Species Act if remnant conservation populations, such as those in South Piney, are not protected.

◆ **AGRICULTURE AND LIVESTOCK:** Like much of the Upper Green River Valley, South Piney is historic cattle country that continues to support a ranching lifestyle on open range. Half a

dozen ranchers own almost half the land the proposed drilling area, while the rest is in federal and state hands. All told, these ranchers run a few thousand head of cattle on this private land and on grazing allotments covering most of the project area's public lands. New and upgraded roads, well pads, compressor stations and other industrial facilities could undermine this traditional use of the land. Road dust and the spread of noxious weeds could displace forage.

◆ **HISTORY:** Dozens of marked and unmarked immigrant graves and even a birth stone border the historic Lander Cutoff of the Oregon Trail where it passes through the South Piney project area. Built by a crew of mostly Utah Mormons in 1858, the 256-mile cutoff, linking South Pass and the Snake River, was the first Western wagon road commissioned by the federal government. The West's pioneer trails, which preserve the story of how the region was settled, are linear graveyards that deserve protection. At South Piney, the marks left by the immigrating pioneers remain visible. Wagon wheels left iron scrapes on rock and their ruts follow South Piney Creek, wind past a way station at Snider Basin, and continue to the lone grave site of Elizabeth Paul on LaBarge Creek. Tim Thompson, a fourth-generation South Piney rancher and president of the Sublette County Historical Society, says 30 marked graves line the canyon leading to Snider Basin and old homesteads cover the entire area. Thompson, who knows of five sites on his family's 9,000-acre spread, lives in the James Sykes homestead, bought by his great-grandfather in 1902.

◆ **AIR QUALITY:** The clear mountain air and 100-mile peak-to-peak views are already obscured by the flaring, diesel exhaust and other emissions from existing gas fields. Energy extraction is the largest source of air pollution in BLM's Pinedale Resource Area. Extending the gas boom into the Wyoming Range foothills may further degrade the region's air quality.

◆ **SCENERY AND RECREATION:** For years, families and solitary campers have come to the Middle Piney drainage to enjoy the spectacular cliffs and forested hillsides, abundant wildlife, and the starlit sky. Middle Piney has two popular campgrounds and plenty of open land near the creek for dispersed use. From Middle Piney Lake, a quiet haven where motorized boats are prohibited, one can see the highest peak in the range, red-topped 11,363-foot Wyoming Peak. The area serves as a trailhead for hunters of every age and ability, and outfitters depend on its abundant wildlife and quiet scenery. Anglers also come to test their fly-casting skills on the small trout streams.

GET INVOLVED TODAY:

The Upper Green River Valley Coalition, which represents the interests of local citizens, ranchers, outfitters, hunters and conservationists, prepared the *Conserving Wyoming's Heritage* alternative to help BLM balance South Piney's natural values and heritage with its energy potential. You can obtain a copy the Coalition's alternative at www.uppergreen.org.

- Details of the coalbed methane proposal, including information on how to comment, can be found on BLM's website at: www.wy.blm.gov/nepa/pfodocs/southpiney/index.htm. To get on the agency's South Piney EIS mailing list write to: P.O. Box 768, Pinedale, WY 82941, or pinedale_wymail@blm.gov.
- Contact Upper Green River Valley Coalition: (www.uppergreen.org)
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