

# Upper Green River Valley Coalition

## Quality of Life: It's Not Only About the Money *Energy development taking a toll on communities, stretching services thin and overloading infrastructure*

The communities of Wyoming's Upper Green River Valley are facing a radical transformation as gas-field operations rush to suck as much natural gas out of the ground while record high prices last. Since the gas boom began in the late 1990s, parts of Sublette County have been experiencing housing shortages, infrastructure failures, bad air, increased traffic and accidents, crime and social problems, such as substance abuse and domestic abuse. The rapid pace of development, which federal land managers failed to anticipate, could be eroding the reasons why Pinedale-area residents choose to live in this wildlife-filled valley bounded by the Wyoming and Wind River ranges. Surveys indicate the locals enjoy the area's slow pace, scenery, safety and recreational opportunities. These values are in trouble. Energy development is bringing in a flood of money and waves of well-paid gas-field workers driving new pickups. It is also brings problems. **The lesson here is that pacing development is good not just for wildlife and landscapes, but for people and communities as well.**

Here are some of the socio-economic impacts by the numbers<sup>1</sup>:

- **Traffic:** Measured at the U.S. Highway 189 and State Route 351 crossroads, near the county fairgrounds, vehicle volumes increased six-fold since 1997. Some 725 vehicles a day travel Pinedale's South Tyler Street, the scene of a recent truck spill of toxic gas condensates.
- **Traffic accidents:** The number of people killed or injured on Sublette County roads has jumped from 60 in 1996 to more than 100 in 2003.
- **Domestic violence:** Indicators, such as arrests and shelter stays, have soared since 2000. The number of shelter days has increased seven-fold and the number of clients has quadrupled.
- **Crime:** Sublette's crime index has crept upward since the mid 1990s, even though statewide crime index has remained flat. In 2003, the year Sublette's crime rate surpassed the state's, crime increased by 68 percent, or 14 times faster than the growth in population.
- **Housing:** Affordable housing is fast disappearing. Since 2001, average rents are up about 33 percent to more than \$800 last year for a two- or three-bedroom house. The average price of homes sold in the Pinedale area jumped from \$184,646 to \$237,729 between 2003 and 2004, making Pinedale the most expensive real estate market outside the Jackson area.
- **Government Services:** Health, emergency and social services are stretched thin with little relief in sight. County ambulance runs, for example, increased nearly 50 percent since 2000 to 629 runs last year. Fire department calls tripled from 40 in 2000 to 133 in 2003. A December 2004 condensate spill in Pinedale highlighted the glaring need for better Hazmat preparation.
- **Local Government:** Municipalities receive very little oil and gas revenue, even though development imposes numerous obligations on local governments. Infrastructural demands, for example, have outstripped Pinedale's fiscal ability to meet them.

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<sup>1</sup> Material for this fact sheet comes from a monitoring plan released in April 2005 by the Pinedale Anticline Working Group, an eight-member advisory group comprised of community and industry representatives. See the April 15 report produced by the socio-economic task group.

Pinedale's streets, sewers and other infrastructure are proving inadequate to accommodate the growth and traffic associated with the rapid energy development. **Currently the city of Pinedale has only half the financing to cover its estimated \$11 million in needed infrastructure upgrades.** A sewage-lagoon expansion alone is costing the town \$2.3 million. Thru-town truck traffic has degraded South Tyler Street beyond repair. While municipalities like Pinedale take the brunt of mineral extraction's impacts, they reap very little of its revenue, which the state shares mostly with the counties and school districts. For example, Pinedale received \$213,000 in energy-related revenue last year, covering about 10 percent of its budget.

"It is difficult to even fathom a municipality of 1,400 people coming up with \$5.5 million in matching funds," reported a socio-economic task group to the advisory Pinedale Anticline Working Group in April. "A municipality can handle a steady growth rate, however with a boom of this magnitude, the demand for the services to keep pace comes all at once." Of course, municipal revenues are up (sales tax receipts in Pinedale leaped nearly 10-fold in the past decade, for example), but the cost of providing government services is climbing at an even faster pace.

### **CAUSE: UNSUSTAINABLE RATE OF DRILLING**

The Bureau of Land Management grossly underestimated the pace of development when it authorized the Pinedale Anticline gas field in 1999. As a result, the Anticline's Environmental Impact Statement does not adequately address impacts to the air (nitrous oxide emissions are triple what were predicted) and to the community. Five years ago, officials anticipated eight rigs drilling year-round. Instead, the Anticline has been seeing the equivalent of 25 year-round rigs, and this summer 50 to 60 rigs are expected to be drilling there. As a result, drilling crews are packing the motels, leaving little room for other Pinedale visitors, and driving up rents. And it's only going to get busier. The BLM expects to approve 450 drilling permits on the Anticline next year. That's 100 more than last year. Record-high natural gas prices created an unanticipated incentive to get new wells on line fast. This market-driven pace of drilling has been hard on Upper Green communities and local governments pay the price.

### **WHAT CAN BE DONE**

It is time BLM consider limiting activity levels in its overheated gas fields and ask profitable corporations doing business here to shoulder more of the burden their activities impose on the communities. The Upper Green River Valley Coalition insists on these and other measures in its *Responsible Energy Development* proposal, submitted to BLM to help guide the revision of the Pinedale Resource Management Plan. The Coalition insists that new development be phased so that drilling and production activities leave a softer footprint on the land. By staging drilling at a sustainable pace, industry can avoid overwhelming local communities with sudden influxes of people, traffic and social problems. Drill rigs are exempted from Wyoming's Industrial Siting Act, which requires industry to contribute to mitigation funds to offset the social costs of major facilities. It's time for the Legislature to reconsider this exemption for drill rigs and production facilities.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** visit [www.uppergreen.org](http://www.uppergreen.org). Upper Green River Valley Coalition: Linda Baker, [Linda@uppergreen.org](mailto:Linda@uppergreen.org), 307-367-3670