



Drilling plan exceeds new ozone rule

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LANDER -- The Bureau of Land Management's preferred plan for new natural gas drilling in the Pinedale Anticline would create more air pollution than would be allowed by recently announced federal air quality standards, according to the BLM's own projections.

The BLM has proposed to permit the drilling of 4,400 new natural gas wells in the Pinedale Anticline in Sublette County. That development would result in high-end ozone concentrations of about 77 parts per billion, according to BLM computer models.

The Environmental Protection Agency's new standard for ozone -- announced just two weeks ago -- will allow for high averages of only 75 parts per billion. Any eight-hour average above 75 will be considered unhealthy for children, the elderly and those with existing respiratory conditions.

Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality has issued a series of ozone advisories for the Pinedale area this winter, warning residents about anticipated unhealthy ozone spikes, including one each for Sunday and Monday. Those unhealthy levels, tied to energy development in the Upper Green River Basin, are being recorded even before the additional drilling is allowed.

But an industry representative said Monday that air pollution generated by the 4,400 new wells, given year-round access, would actually be less than the BLM has projected.

The BLM's computer model, while valuable, is also by necessity simplified, said Paul Matheny, a regional vice president with Questar Exploration and Production Co. And it only takes into account reductions in emissions resulting from implementation of cleaner rig engines.

Questar and the other companies involved in developing the Pinedale Anticline will put into operation, once year-round drilling access is granted, a host of other strategies and procedures that would further reduce air pollution, and which weren't included in the BLM's air quality computer models, Matheny said.

"There's a bunch of emissions reductions not included in the model," Matheny said. "And the sooner we can complete the (environmental analysis of proposed year-round drilling), the sooner the modifications can be implemented that will result in improved air quality."

The only way these less-polluting modifications, such as cleaner rig engines and low-impact liquids gathering systems, would be economically feasible, would be with year-round access coupled with a guarantee that companies will be able to use the modified rigs for years to come, he said.

"The ability of the operators to commit their contractors to invest the big capital required to make those changes relies on their ability to have year-round access," Matheny said. "If the rig has to go away at the end of the summer, it can't stay year-round, and there's no guarantee it'll be back next year -- you can't go and spend \$2 million to modify a rig that you may never see again."

Some people in the Pinedale area, however, say industry is trying to strong-arm locals into accepting year-round development of the anticline instead of being "good neighbors," as the companies claim to be.

Bob McCarty, a Pinedale resident and former wildlife biologist with the BLM for 21 years, said the energy companies are "dangling" high-technology rigs in front of locals like a carrot, which they'll only receive if industry is allowed to drill year-round.

"They just want carte blanche for year-round access; it's a power play," McCarty said. "To me it's just blackmail. If they are truly good neighbors, why can't they provide the state-of-the-art equipment in the summer? They're using this winter access as their reason for bringing in the better technology, but they could easily do it in the summertime."

Matheny, however, said it would not be cost-effective for operators to modify equipment for purely seasonal access.

For their part, officials with Wyoming's BLM said it's too early to say what might impact the new EPA ozone standards will have on the proposed new drilling.

The EPA submitted a highly critical letter regarding the BLM's planned development of the anticline Feb. 14, about a month before the EPA's announcement regarding new ozone standards.

In the letter, the EPA said the BLM's plan did not satisfactorily address several environmental concerns, including potential groundwater contamination and impacts to the region's air quality.

Dennis Korycinski, the BLM air quality specialist for Wyoming, said his agency is working with the EPA to address its concerns.

"The EPA, WDEQ and BLM are involved in rather intensive discussions and

negotiations," Korycinski said. "And it would be inappropriate for me to speculate at this time on how that may turn out. We are working cooperatively on behalf of the public, and we're well aware of the concerns that are out there."