



BLM needs to get its air-quality study right

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Critics of a federal agency's management of Pinedale Anticline energy development are playing a numbers game that doesn't add up.

But neither does the air quality analysis upon which the Bureau of Land Management based its decision in 2000.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council and the Upper Green River Valley Coalition charge that the BLM has allowed more drilling in the Pinedale Anticline field than the agency approved eight years ago. The groups contend the agency set the limit at 700 producing natural gas wells.

The rules listed in the BLM's record of decision for gas-field development in the anticline are confusing and, at times, contradictory. The BLM often uses "wells" and "well pads" interchangeably. However, with directional drilling, several wells can be drilled per pad.

The agency says the number limits refer exclusively to well pads. The BLM's document requires operators to use directional drilling wherever possible to "minimize undue surface disturbance and impacts on wildlife, sensitive viewsheds and other resource values." Those goals are consistent with what conservation groups also wanted at the time the requirements were established.

We're at a loss to explain why the BLM estimates that 850 wells are producing in the Pinedale Anticline, but the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission says it's 940. A definitive number shouldn't be difficult to obtain.

But it's clear that the BLM's 2000 decision approved the operators' proposal for 700 producing well pads over the next 10 to 15 years. In fact, the agency noted then that "as many as 900 well pads may need to be constructed and drilled and as many as 200 of these well pads may be plugged, abandoned and reclaimed because the wells would be dry holes or uneconomical to produce."

To date, according to the BLM, there are only 342 well pads in the Pinedale Anticline -- well below the limit the agency established.

But the BLM admits that the original analysis of the potential impact on air quality in the anticline field development assumed a "one-to-one ratio of wells to pads." The study's anticipated levels of air pollution were based on an assumption that there would be no more than 700 producing natural gas wells.

The BLM can't have it both ways. While the agency makes a compelling case that it limited the number of well pads, it should have conducted an air-quality study based on the number of producing wells, not the number of pads. Drilling more than one well from a single pad reduces surface disturbance, but air emissions are a different story.

Conservation groups say they are concerned about air quality in the area, and they cite elevated ozone levels that have led to at least five alerts about potential health risks. We agree that air quality is a serious issue.

The BLM started a new environmental analysis in 2006 when emissions of nitrogen oxides exceeded the limits that had been established in 2000. What triggered the study -- and the recent health alerts about ozone -- was not the total number of wells in the area, but the amount of emissions.

The BLM is considering a controversial plan to allow up to 4,400 more gas wells to be drilled in the anticline. Groups that want to reduce emissions from natural gas development and protect the environment would be better-served by focusing on the BLM's updated environmental analysis instead of the past record of decision.

The agency has acknowledged that development has had unintended impacts, and the new study is the proper place to address those problems today.

It's essential that the BLM completes the air quality study based on the correct development data. With human health at risk due to the elevated ozone levels, there's no room for error.