



Firms tell only part of environmental story

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Perspective

Over the past 20 years, corporations have determined it is good for business to claim they are more sensitive to the environment. This is what Shell, Questar, and Ultra Petroleum have been engaged in during recent months in the Wyoming media: full-page ads in local and state newspapers, underwriting of Wyoming Public Radio, and spots on local radio stations around the state, all aimed at touting their efforts to protect the environment on the Pinedale Anticline. Shell even ran full-page ads claiming that all is well in Wyoming in Congressional Quarterly, the venerable journal read by Washington decision makers.

I support the efforts Shell, Questar, and Ultra are making to improve their environmental record. And I support their right to advertise these advances. Yet recent ads have made environmental claims that should be viewed skeptically. They are overstated or incomplete.

Ads in the Casper Star-Tribune imply that year-round drilling will not harm wildlife. But this claim is not supported by the science. Research done by Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc., documented a 46 percent decline in mule deer populations on the Pinedale Anticline since natural gas development began.

In comments submitted to the BLM regarding the proposed year-round development on the Pinedale Anticline, Dr. William Alldredge, a well-known expert on big game, concluded that the proposal for development on the Pinedale Anticline "is contrary to [the] best available scientific evidence and in my opinion would only exacerbate an already serious situation for mule deer and pronghorn antelope that depend on the Mesa for crucial winter habitat." There is no scientific backing for any claim that year-round drilling without winter drilling prohibitions will not harm wildlife.

The operators also claim, "With year-round access, [they] will ... install a liquids gathering system across the Pinedale Anticline Project Area that will ... reduce emissions from storage tanks and trucks, and further reduce rig engine Nox emissions by 80 percent within 3.5 years after the record of decision is issued." While these are important steps to reduce pollution and we support them, these provisions will not do enough. According to the Pinedale Anticline Revised Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (now there's a mouthful), even with these provisions in place, the BLM still anticipates

10 days per year of significant impacts to visibility (haze) in the Bridger Wilderness Area caused directly by natural gas development on the Pinedale Anticline and 25 days per year of significant cumulative impacts.

In these ads, Shell, Questar, and Ultra Petroleum promote "year-round access." This would free them from the long-standing and sensible requirement that prohibits drilling on big-game crucial winter ranges during the winter. But in order to protect our wildlife and our children's lungs, we need the BLM and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality to insist on year-round protection.

Certainly I recognize the economic benefits Shell, Questar, and Ultra bring to Wyoming. Without them, we would have fewer jobs, our university wouldn't be as affordable, our public schools might be weaker, and Wyoming wouldn't be one of the few states in the nation operating with a budget surplus.

But the revenue brought to Wyoming because of our wildlife and clear vistas is not to be dismissed: In fiscal year 2006 fishing and hunting expenditures in the state were \$382 million, and nationally a recent study has shown outdoor recreation generates \$730 billion each year. "Development on Wyoming's terms," as Gov. Ed Herschler said, is difficult to achieve when the land manager calling the shots is a federal agency. The Pinedale Anticline is mostly public land, and the oil and gas that is being retrieved is mostly owned by the public. We who work in public-interest conservation do not have the billions of dollars in profits that would allow us to go toe-to-toe in advertising with these companies. But we -- and you -- have the opportunity to tell the BLM what you think should happen to our public lands and wildlife.

Since 2000, operators have developed 642 wells and 186 miles of roads over 4,835 acres of land, and during that time, mule deer on the Mesa have declined by 46 percent. Sage grouse have declined by 21 percent in areas near drill pads and roads. During the next two decades, Shell, Questar, Ultra, and other oil companies want to add 4,399 more wells over 12,885 additional acres, and they want to do it all year, without any protection for wildlife during precarious winter months. What will happen to our wildlife then? Advertising will not make up for the loss of this precious resource.

The BLM will take your letters until Feb. 11. Send them to WYMail_PAPA_YRA@blm.gov.

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