

BLM OKs Veritas seismic project

Greens protest second project

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A Texas-based geophysical exploration company has won federal permission to conduct one three-dimensional geophysical project in southeast Wyoming, while environmental groups are asking the Bureau of Land Management to block another project near Merna.

The groups contend the Merna project threatens wildlife winter range and migration corridors in the Upper Green River basin.

Veritas DGC Land, Inc. of Texas has received permission from the Rock Springs office of the BLM to run an exploration project on 410 square miles south of the Jonah natural gas field, in Sweetwater and Sublette counties.

According to George Schoenfield of the BLM's Rock Springs field office, Veritas' use of surface exploration will be restricted to 100-foot wide corridors along the seismic lines.

The South Jonah project overlies the southern portion of the Jonah Gas Field in Sublette County and extends 12 miles south into Sweetwater

County. Some 97 percent of the project area is public land managed by the BLM, while 2 percent is managed by the state of Wyoming and less than 1 percent (40 acres) is private.

Veritas is scheduled to begin seismic exploration Saturday.

"They'll be in and out by late October," said Schoenfield said of Veritas, "so there won't be any interference with big game wildlife."

The Sublette antelope herd is not expected to enter the project area until after the project is finished.

That's not the situation farther north, in what is known as the Merna project area, said Kelly Matheson, Greater Yellowstone program coordinator for the Wyoming Outdoor Council. Concerned that a proposed seismic energy exploration project would harm big game herds of the southern Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, eight conservation groups this week urged the BLM to block a similar Veritas project covering 290-square miles in western Sublette County.

The BLM is expected to

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BLM: The Merna project could run five months into winter

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issue an environmental assessment in mid-August and exploration could begin in September.

Unlike the South Jonah project, where the exploration will be finished before winter migration begins, the Merna project could run three to five months into winter, disrupting the migration routes of big game animals and the hunting season in the area, said Matheson.

"We have big game migrating out of four mountain ranges," said Matheson, "the Wyoming, Salt River, Snake and Gros Ventre, into the longest migration corridors in the country."

Veritas' Marketing Vice President Dennis Jordhoy said, "We care as much as anyone about wildlife." He said Veritas strives very hard to meet the regulatory criteria set forth by the BLM.

"We strive to operate in a conscientious manner," said Jordhoy.

Scientists concerned

The concerns of the eight environmental groups are buttressed by a recent scientific paper written by BLM, Wyoming Game and Fish and Wyoming Cooperative Service biologists, said Matheson.

Based on two years of monitoring the distribution and seasonal movement patterns of antelope and mule deer in the Upper Green River basin, the paper discusses the importance of winter range, transition habitat, and migration corridors to maintaining healthy populations in the basin.

"Reduction in effective winter range size, as potentially brought about by extensive natural gas development ... may increase deer density in remaining winter ranges, reducing forage quality, fawn survival, and overwinter carrying capacity," said the paper's authors — Hall Sawyer, Fred Lindzey, Doug McWhirter and Keith Andrews.

Veritas plans to use vibroseis buggies, ATVs and helicopters to conduct the bulk of the geophysical mapping operations.

The buggies — which are 9 feet wide, 20 feet long and can weigh up to 65,000 pounds — will be equipped with all-terrain, low-pressure tires to minimize surface impacts, according to company plans.

Drills would be used and dynamite detonated in the few areas where the terrain is too rough or too soft to support the buggies, the notice said.

Matheson complained that while BLM talks about low-pres-

sure tires having a light touch on the land, other BLM officials note that the vibroseis trucks crush up to 70 percent of all plants in their way, leaving swaths of destruction and routes quickly exploited by unauthorized ATV riders.

"So which is it?" asked Matheson. "Little impact or destruction?"

"The timing of this project could not be worse," explained Bruce Pendery, an attorney representing Defenders of Wildlife. "This project threatens the big game animals that rely on the Upper Green River Basin every winter for their survival. If approved, the project would violate the BLM's own restrictions that it has put in place to protect big game in the Upper Green."

Matheson noted that the BLM denied a project proposal last year that would have been active for a month last winter. Now, she said, BLM seems prepared to allow Veritas to be active through much of the sensitive winter months, in violation of BLM's own standards.

The eight conservation groups asking the Bureau of Land Management to block the Merna Project are Wyoming Outdoor Council, Defenders of Wildlife, The Wilderness Society, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Con-

servation Alliance, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, Natural Resources Defense Council and the Wyoming chapter of the Sierra Club.

Hunters object

The Wyoming Wildlife Federation isn't asking the BLM to block the project, but is asking it to "take wildlife into consideration," said Larry Baesler, executive director. He said the group is worried about the timing of the project this upcoming winter, not to mention the impact on the range, the sagebrush and upland bird species.

"We would expect all seismicograph activity to stay clear of any winter or other crucial habitat during the critical time periods when wildlife needs it most," said Baesler. "Wildlife does not have the option of just picking up and finding new crucial habitat on a moment's notice."

Veritas works on land and at sea to gather seismic data for oil and gas companies, which use the information to manage reserves and to determine suitable locations for drilling exploratory wells. Headquartered in Houston, Veritas posted \$477 million in sales in 2001, recording a profit of \$22.5 million on the efforts of 4,300 employees.