

Work on winter range still cloaked

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GREEN RIVER -- The public will not be allowed to comment on individual requests for exceptions to seasonal wildlife closures by southwest Wyoming energy producers operating in the gas-rich Pinedale Anticline fields.

State Bureau of Land Management Acting State Director Alan Kesterke said the agency has denied a request by a coalition of conservation groups to open the process of granting exceptions within the agency's Pinedale Resource Area to allow for further public scrutiny.

Kesterke said in a Dec. 20 letter to Scott Groene of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition that the agency will not change its process of evaluating winter range exception requests under the BLM's current mitigation guidelines.

"We have reviewed the situation as described in your letter and find no reason to overturn any recent oil and gas exception decisions made in the Pinedale Field Office, or to modify the current way they are handling exception requests," Kesterke wrote.

But a coalition spokesman said the groups were disappointed by the BLM's decision to not allow increased public comment on the exception requests.

Peter Aengst with the Bozeman, Mont. office of The Wilderness Society said the decision points to the need for the BLM to consider a moratorium on all new oil and gas leases in the area until it finishes its revisions of the 14-year old Pinedale Resource Management Plan (RMP).

The agency has been operating under the Pinedale RMP approved in 1998 until the revised plan is issued.

Kesterke said in his letter that professional resource staff specialists in the BLM field offices evaluates numerous natural resource management actions every day.

He said recommendations on requests -- such as winter range drilling exceptions -- are forwarded to the appropriate management level for final action.

"To meet our agency's statutory obligations, and equally important as a public service, our staffs try to process this workload as efficiently and effectively as possible," Kesterke wrote.

Under the Pinedale plan, restrictions are in place for elk, mule deer, antelope, and moose in crucial winter range on some parts of the Pinedale Anticline from Nov. 15 through April 30.

As of Dec. 1, the agency had received 39 requests from energy development companies seeking exceptions to big game crucial winter range restrictions this winter, according to BLM figures.

Of those, one company withdrew two requests, two requests are pending a determination, one request was formally denied. In all, 34 requests were approved.

Of the 34 requests granted, 20 were granted for less than one week and another 11 were granted for less than two weeks, BLM officials said.

In early November, officials with The Wilderness Society, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance and the Wyoming Chapter of the Sierra Club wrote a letter to BLM State Director Bob Bennett requesting the agency provide opportunities for public comments on the exception requests.

The groups said they were writing Bennett because Pinedale Field Office Manager Prill Meham refused a coalition request in October to provide a comment period or notice to the public of the exception requests.

The coalition letter said environmental law requires the BLM to involve the public in decision making to the fullest extent possible, which is only possible if the BLM advises the interested public of the proposed action.

The coalition also noted that in October, the BLM waived wildlife protections when approved the drilling of five wells in crucial mule deer winter range on the Mesa in the Pinedale Anticline for a study project.

Kesterke said the authorization for the agency to consider exceptions can be found in the Pinedale RMP and Record of Decision for the Pinedale Anticline. He noted all of those documents were submitted to the public for review and comment under environmental law.

He said the agency coordinates the review of each request with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department prior to making a decision on the exception.

Agency biologists assess the current big game status and potential impacts when deciding on any exception request, he said.

But Aengst said granting the winter range exceptions will hurt big game winter habitat in the Mesa that is already in poor shape because of drought.

It is also impacting mule deer, elk and antelope migration patterns for animals already under stress from winter conditions.

"What this all points to ... is the fact that the BLM should basically put a freeze or hold on things until they can go through this comprehensive process of a land-use plan revision, which is just starting," Aengst said.

"That's the place where the public can kind of focus in and we can have a frank and open discussion about the trade-offs that happen between wildlife and energy development ... and the assessments the BLM has done about what the wildlife can handle in terms of disturbance or can't handle in terms of exceptions," he said.

"Instead, there's this kind of loosey-goosey granting of all these little actions and exceptions out there and that's the problem with cumulative effects," Aengst said. "On their own they don't amount to much, but added together it can mean a lot for wildlife."