

Surface activity key to Jonah

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PINEDALE — Up to 250 natural gas wells per year and as many as 3,100 wells total could be drilled in the Jonah natural gas fields in southwestern Wyoming under the Bureau of Land Management's draft alternatives for the proposed Jonah II Infill Drilling Project.

BLM officials said the alternatives reflect the agency's desire to have the level of surface disturbance — rather than actual well numbers — determine the level and pace of development in the field.

"What our decision (document) will focus on is surface disturbance rather than the number of wells," Jonah Drilling Project Interdisciplinary Team Leader Carol Kruse said Thursday during an open house here.

"This is a major departure from many previous Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) in the past ... where virtually all of the draft alternatives were based on different number of wells, but we decided that might be the wrong approach for this EIS," Kruse said.

"We could see no more wells or a lot more wells out there ... the range of well numbers will be determined under that amount of surface disturbance levels that will be allowed," she said.

"We drafted these alternatives to let the public take a look at them to see if we're on the right track ... before we analyze the impacts of the alternatives in the EIS," Kruse said.

The BLM unveiled its five alternatives that will be examined in an EIS on the Jonah II Infill Drilling Project. In addition to three proposed development alternatives, the agency will also examine a no-action alternative and an alternative that would continue the current pace of development.

Kruse cautioned, however, that the alternatives could be modified or slightly changed after the agency analyzes new information received during the scoping process from producers operating in the field.

EnCana Oil and Gas, Inc., BP America and other natural gas development companies with leases in the field are seeking to expand

JONAH FIELD: Companies want more drilling

Continued from A1

approved by the BLM in 2000.

The Modified Jonah Field II Natural Gas Project Environmental Assessment (EA) allowed for the sinking of 533 wells from 497 pads and cutting in half the distance between gas wells.

The companies submitted an infill drilling proposal to the BLM's Pinedale Field Office in early 2003 seeking to add another 1,250 gas wells from 850 well locations to the Jonah Gas fields over a period of about 25 years.

Infill drilling involves the placement of additional wells in an area already producing oil and gas to speed gas extraction. The process usually means that environmental impacts associated with the drilling are expected to be fewer than if the company drilled in a new field.

The Jonah fields are located about 32 miles southeast of Pinedale and 28 miles northwest of Farson in Sublette and Sweetwater counties.

The total project area of the proposal includes approximately 28,000 acres of federal surface and mineral estate managed by the BLM, and some

state and private lands.

Kruse said varying the number of wells per wellpad and the centralized production facilities will allow the agency to analyze the same number of wells at the different levels of surface development.

Past oil and gas development decisions currently authorize the disturbance of approximately 14 percent of the project area during the drilling phase and a disturbance of approximately 5 percent of the area over the life of the field, or the production phase.

She said the range of levels of disturbance being analyzed in the document will be between 14 percent and 67 percent during the drilling phase and between 5 percent and 20 percent during the production phase.

Kruse said based on new information received from operators during the BLM's recent scoping period, industry officials now estimate that it will take closer to 2,000 wells to recover 80 to 90 percent of the gas reserves in the field.

The alternatives to be examined in the EIS include:

■ The no-action alternative that would continue the

existing management, which allows for about 533 wells from 497 wellpads.

■ The current proposed action alternative would allow for the 1,250 proposed by the operators from up to 850 new wellpads. There would be 40-45 wellpads per section, or one wellpad for every 14-16 acres. Under the alternative, approximately 250 wells would be drilled per year.

■ Alternative A would allow from 1,250 to 3,100 wells, but no new wellpads. The alternative would allow for 16 wellpads per section, or one wellpad every 40 acres. There would be 75, 150 or 250 wells drilled per year.

■ Alternative B would allow from 1,250 to 3,100 wells and authorize approximately 1,250 to 3,100 new wellpads. There would be no limit on the number of wellpads per section and 75, 150 or 250 wells would be drilled per year.

■ Alternative C would allow from 1,250 to 3,100 wells, including 755 to 3,020 new wellpads. It would allow 16, 32 and 64 wellpads per section — or one wellpad every 40, 20 and 10 acres — and 75, 150 or 250 wells would be drilled per year.