

Red Desert at critical juncture

Need balanced approach to energy production

The effects of intensive natural gas development in the Jonah field near Pinedale must be taken into consideration as Wyoming and the nation determine the fate of the strange and beautiful Jack Morrow Hills in the Red Desert.

The Bureau of Land Management has pushed back the date for the Final Environmental Impact Statement regarding the Jack Morrow Hills in the Red Desert. The BLM had originally planned to release the Final EIS this month. Now the Rock Springs Field Office of the BLM's Web site states the date is "to be determined."

The BLM received more than 60,000 comments between Feb. 21 and May 23 on the draft EIS for the 575,000-acre Jack Morrow Hills planning area. Residents of Wyoming and those who know the area have shown their concern. The BLM's Final EIS will set the parameters for the areas in Jack Morrow Hills that can be drilled or explored for oil and gas reserves. Some oil and gas leases already exist in the planning area, which by law must be honored.

But there must be caution and consideration of all the resources in the Hills. The development of the Jonah field provides a disturbing example of what can happen to undeveloped lands when mineral explorers make a big strike.

The Jonah gas fields have undergone intense drilling with the most advanced oil and gas technology known to the industry. It has become one of the most productive fields in the country, providing gas the nation demands. However, even industry insiders worry that the magnitude of the drilling may do extensive damage to the surface land and the ecosystem as a whole — turning it into an industrial beltway.

Drilling of such magnitude in the Jack Morrow Hills would completely destroy its values as wildlife habitat, as wildland, as recreational resource, as a spiritual place for American Indian tribes, as rare desert ecology in North America, and as home for a herd of desert elk and many endangered species of animals and plants. There must be landscapes and wild areas in the West that take precedence over oil and gas production. The Red Desert's Jack Morrow Hills is one of those areas.

In recognition the special significance of this area, Encana Oil and Gas, the largest Jonah Field producer, has offered to pursue a Red Desert mitigation program through a potential trade or suspension of its mineral leases in the Jack Morrow Hills planning area. The Encana offer hinges on the BLM allowing a dramatic increase in the number of wells in the Jonah Field.

The Encana proposal would, in effect, trade off one area for another. It opens the way to a dialogue about conservation and supplying the nation's energy needs. An Encana official stated the company is prepared to invest up to \$10 million in such a mitigation program.

If the BLM's Final EIS allows intense drilling in other sensitive areas of the Jack Morrow Hills, the Encana mitigation program decreases in value and meaning. The BLM should weigh these factors carefully before releasing its Final EIS.