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Wildlife in winter

Impacts of gas drilling in Sublette County debated

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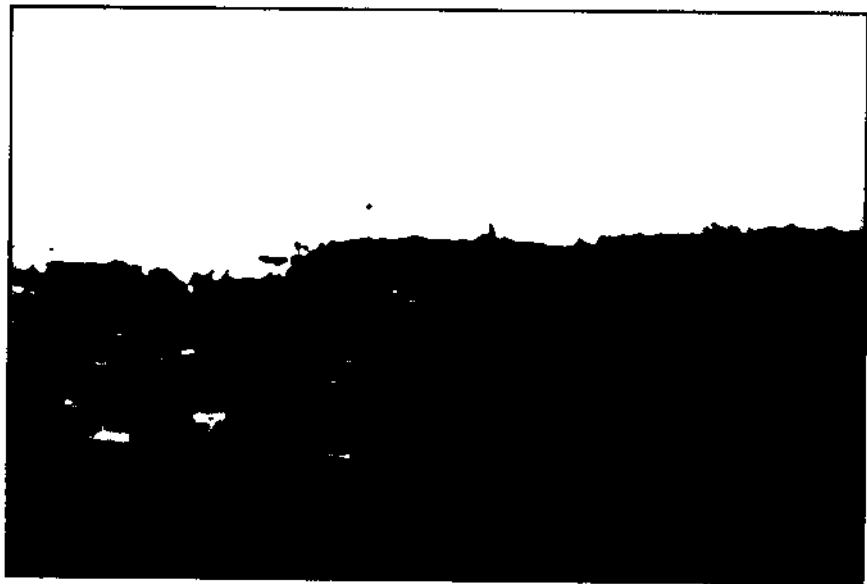
PINEDALE — By Wyoming standards, it's a small stretch of land — about 8,600 acres tucked below the Wind River Mountains on the Pinedale Anticline in southwestern Wyoming.

But though small in size, Questar Exploration and Development Company's proposal to embark on a winter-long drilling project on that 8,600 acres is representative of the larger debate on how best to extract the nation's energy resources while protecting the environment, and wildlife in particular.

On Friday, Questar received Bureau of Land Management approval to drill eight natural gas wells from a single location in crucial mule deer winter range on the Pinedale Mesa. Four of the wells would be drilled throughout this winter season.

The drilling project marks the second straight year of winter drilling for the company. In November 2002, Questar was granted a six-month exemption to seasonal drilling restrictions to drill five wells from a single location known as the Stewart Point well.

This year's wells would be located approximately five miles from Pinedale and about a half-mile from the Stewart Point well. Like Stewart Point, the wells would be drilled from a single well pad.



QUESTAR/Courtesy

The Pinedale Anticline, including nine proposed drilling sites, is shown in this artist's rendition.

As the company did last year, Questar would employ directional drilling technology to minimize surface disturbances.

Project plans call for drilling four wells during the 2003-2004 winter season. The other four wells would be drilled in the summer of 2004.

Directional drilling eight wells from a single pad eliminates the need for eight separate well sites, centralizes production facilities and

consolidates access routes to a single road, Questar officials said in a recent interview.

One drawback is that it can take as long as 250 days to drill the eight wells from one pad — hence the need to drill continuously throughout the winter season.

The winter-long drilling project is also part of a multi-year

Please see DRILLING, A12

comprehensive study on the effects of oil and gas operations on wintering deer within crucial winter range in the Anticline. The study is examining the potential impacts of winter-long drilling on deer herds.

The study was contingent upon Questar receiving a seasonal exception to the BLM's winter drilling restrictions again this year. Wyoming Game and Fish Department officials say the study needs to cover several years of data to draw effective conclusions.

The BLM's Pinedale Anticline Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) approved in 2000 outlines the pace and level of development in the fields. The EIS prohibits drilling in deer, elk and moose winter range from Nov. 15 through April 30, but does provide for possible short-term exceptions to the rules.

Environmental groups, however, are strongly opposed to Questar's Stewart Point winter-long drilling. They say it results in the fragmentation of crucial wildlife habitat for wintering deer and antelope that migrate through the region.

Conservationists also contend the agency is breaking its own past decisions and rules aimed at protecting mule deer when they are highly stressed and at their most vulnerable.

BLM spokesman Rey Adame said Friday the agency approved Questar's drilling exception request, but did not approve the company's request to allow for two drilling rigs to operate concurrently.

"This portion of the request was not approved by the BLM as it is not consistent with the parameters established in the ongoing Sublette mule deer study that includes an evaluation regarding impacts to wintering mule deer by energy-related activities," Adame said in a statement.

Time constraints

Questar holds leases on approximately 14,800 acres, or about 10 percent of the Pinedale Anticline's approximately 197,345 acre project area.

Questar General Manager of Production Ron Hogan said the company has identified about 8,600 acres that it believes holds the most potential for natural gas recovery. Thus far, the company has drilled 75 wells in the project area.

At the 40-acre spacing recommended in the EIS, the company will need about 225 more gas wells to fully develop the field. Hogan said Questar

would like to drill a substantial portion of those wells from nine new, winter-long pads that would use directional drilling.

"Winter drilling is a big issue for us," he said, because all of the 8,600 acres lies within BLM public lands that are subject to winter drilling stipulations.

"All of our acreage is under winter habitat, so when Nov. 15 rolls around, we're out of business," Hogan said.

"Other operators can go further south to their acreage that's not covered with winter habitat stipulations ... they can drill and then when the summer comes around, they can come back into the area ... but we don't have that luxury," said Hogan.

"So we had to ask ourselves how do we keep this thing going, and we came up with year-round directional drilling," he said. "We believe not only is it good for us to have year-round drilling, but it's going to be better for the environment, the habitat, visual aspects, air quality, for the (local) economy and the area."

Hogan noted the company's "window of drilling" time is also dictated by drilling restrictions during sage grouse strutting season (March 1 to May 15) and sage grouse nesting season (April 1 to July 31).

"We can only drill for three to four months in some portions ... and when we're time compressed, the only solution is to drill more and more wells," he said. More wells means more disturbance, he said.

Year-round drilling from a single pad means truck traffic is reduced because equipment and bulk materials can remain in one place. It's also better for Pinedale's economy because employees are not laid off and rehired seasonally, but will be around for several years.

Adame said by consolidating eight wells on a single pad, the surface disturbance — including associated roads and pipelines — is reduced from approximately 49 acres with eight individual well pads to about 13.4 acres.

No 'quid pro quo'

A coalition of five conservation groups filed a lawsuit last December challenging the BLM's decision to approve Questar's Stewart Point well. The organizations recently submitted comments to the BLM opposing the winter-long drilling project.

Officials with the Wyoming

Outdoor Council, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, The Wilderness Society, Wyoming Wildlife Federation and the Upper Green River Valley Coalition said in a joint release winter-long drilling threatens key migration corridors for mule deer and pronghorn antelope.

"Protecting and restoring traditional wildlife migration corridors ... in the Green River Basin is a daunting challenge for the BLM," said Linda Baker of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

"Safeguarding these vital links between summer and winter ranges is critical to ensure the survival of abundant, healthy, free-ranging wildlife populations for the future," she said.

Meredith Taylor, Wyoming Outdoor Council, Yellowstone Program Director, said directional drilling is not a "quid pro quo" for waiving winter range restrictions.

"As much as we appreciate the industry's interest in directional drilling several wells from the same pad site to reduce the footprint of impact, the BLM has already made a decision to not drill in these crucial habitat areas during the winter," Taylor said.

She said the BLM committed to protecting wildlife on winter range in the Pinedale Anticline EIS.

"But it's a broken promise if they approve Questar drilling this winter just as pronghorn and mule deer are entering their winter period already stressed by oil and gas industry traffic and poor habitat from the prolonged drought," Taylor said.

Wyoming Wildlife Federation Field Representative Cathy Purvis said besides loss of wildlife habitat, public land users will also lose from the proposal.

"The potential loss of access to these public lands that are being drilled is a real threat to sportsmen, recreationists and tourists," Purvis said. "In the long run, what does it mean to public land users when public lands are closed to the public? We need to think about the big picture here."

Deer habitat use

The Mesa area is crucial habitat for many important big game populations in the Rocky Mountain region, including the 50,000-plus Sublette pronghorn antelope herd.

Questar's winter-long drilling projects are part of a larger, multi-year study on the effects of oil and gas operations on wintering deer within the Mesa.

BLM officials believe the deer study is the first of its kind and will provide a model for designing future wildlife monitoring programs to fully assess the effects of energy development in the region.

Preliminary results from last year's study indicate habitat continued to be used by mule deer during drilling on the Stewart Point well.

Adame said data collected for the study thus far has not provided "conclusive evidence" regarding impacts to wintering mule deer by drilling activities.

"Based on this report, it appears that development activity may sometimes affect mule deer distributions immediately adjacent to development sites," he said. "However, there is no indication that mule deer avoided areas more than one-quarter mile from active development areas."

Wyoming Game and Fish Department Jackson/Pinedale Regional Wildlife Supervisor Bernie Holz said the study provides an opportunity to determine the feasibility of drilling techniques that could reduce long-term surface disturbance and protect winter range.

He said to be valid, however, the study must run for a number of years.

"We pretty much said we can't go along with (Questar's winter-long drilling proposal) if this is just going to be a one-year study," Holz said in a phone interview.

"We do not think monitoring for just one year would produce a credible amount of data to draw conclusions from because there are so many other variables, such as temperatures and drought conditions ... so that one winter would not be a good indication," Holz said.

"So it's no surprise to us that Questar asked for another drilling exception and the department's response to the BLM is that we support granting the exception," he said.

Adame said a "definitive conclusion" as to the impacts of energy development on wintering mule deer won't be attempted until the entire study is completed in 2007.