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'Get the gas, but do it right'

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JACKSON -- Conservation groups are urging federal officials to pace natural gas drilling in the Jonah Field near Pinedale to reduce wildlife, air quality and social impacts.

Five conservation groups outlined their hopes in a "position paper" released recently as the Bureau of Land Management mulls several alternatives for more drilling in what is becoming one of the country's most productive gas fields.

The main message, according to Linda Baker, community organizer with the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, is "get the gas, but do it right."

"The first thing that we're concerned about is correctly analyzing impacts and potential impacts," Baker said. "We do need to be able to accurately predict impacts in order to mitigate those impacts effectively."

The groups, including the Wyoming Outdoor Council, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance and the Wilderness Society, say the BLM has inadequately forecast impacts in past analyses.

"In 1998 BLM stated that the field would take 10 to 15 years to develop, but 500 wells were drilled by 2003 in half the expected time," the paper states. "The Pinedale BLM has repeatedly failed to correctly anticipate the total acres of disturbance in Jonah. This translates to a freight train of noise and dust barreling down on threatened sage-grouse populations previously prevalent in the area, and a tornado of habitat loss for both native and non-native animals dependent on the desert sagebrush/grasslands."

Impacts to air quality have also not been adequately projected, the groups said, noting that nitrous oxide emissions have increased nearly three times the amount originally anticipated.

"Unbelievable, the BLM again claims that with up to 3,100 additional wells proposed for the Jonah Infill, there would not be additional socioeconomic impacts on Pinedale, nor any violations of air quality standards," the paper states.

The groups call for phased development, "which will allow development to occur, but at a steady, controlled pace that is manageable."

Florence Murphy, spokeswoman for Encana Oil and Gas Inc., the company likely to drill most of the further Jonah wells, said paced development has been at work in Jonah.

There is a significant amount of natural gas trapped under a small footprint, she said, and that fact took companies some time to understand.

"At each step of understanding, there was a different (environmental study), so there has been paced development to this point," Murphy said.

Still, there is some concern among conservation groups and even the Wyoming Game and Fish Department that the habitat in and around Jonah will be destroyed and inhospitable to wildlife.

Vern Stelter, habitat protection program supervisor with Game and Fish, said off-site mitigation -- wildlife habitat improvements in areas surrounding the gas field -- is key to any Jonah alternative.

"Our position on Jonah is whichever alternative they select, the impact is going to be significant on wildlife," he said. "We have consistently asked them for compensatory or off-site mitigation to address that."

In fact, Encana has offered up to \$20.5 million for habitat improvement projects on 70,000 acres in the Upper Green River area should its preferred alternative be chosen by the BLM. Should the BLM choose its preferred plan, the company will give up to \$1.1 million for treatment of 4,000 acres.

These numbers are in addition to other money from Encana for things such as air quality monitoring and wildlife studies.

Murphy said attention has focused on the off-site mitigation money, but there is on-site mitigation continuing as well.

"It's not one or the other," she said.

Conservation groups say mitigation money should be required -- not voluntary as it is now. On-site mitigation should be the first choice, "because it is difficult if not impossible to create in other places the complex, native communities that are lost."

"'Doing it right' has not exactly occurred in Jonah with regard to wildlife populations and wildlife habitat," Baker said. "The habitat that existed prior to Jonah is more or less ineffective in trying to sustain the kinds of populations we've seen in the past."

Mitigation, too, should be linked to the total acres affected, not total acres directly disturbed, groups say. And the money used for mitigation must be used for direct action, not studies or monitoring.

Mitigation should not be used in crucial wildlife areas such as winter range or nesting sites, as these areas should be left alone, the groups say. The groups also say a sliding scale of mitigation funds dependent on the number of wells approved is not acceptable, as BLM should require "whatever is needed to ensure that all impacts of drilling are mitigated."

Encana will respond to the groups' position paper with specific responses in the next few weeks, Murphy said.

The project area is located about 32 miles southeast of Pinedale and 28 miles northwest of Farson.