

BLM 'experiment' has rough start

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PINEDALE -- Believing the Bureau of Land Management wasn't listening to the advice of a federal advisory group working on natural gas development in the Pinedale Anticline, group member Kirby Hedrick let his feet do his talking Tuesday during a meeting in Pinedale.

To everyone's surprise, Hedrick abruptly tendered his resignation, got up and walked out of the meeting.

"There's nothing for me to do here," he said as he left.

Hedrick's resignation highlights the difficulties and problems that have plagued the BLM's experimental, nine-member adaptive management team known as the Pinedale Anticline Working Group since it began meeting several years ago.

Two members have left, the mission is still unclear, morale is low, and many on the group say they believe the BLM really doesn't want their advice or recommendations.

"I think (all this) has taken a toll on the group's morale, and I fear we still may lose more members," PAWG Chairwoman Linda Baker said in an interview. "I feel as if we've been disenfranchised."

But Baker, BLM Pinedale Field Manager Prill Mecham and other PAWG members said despite some setbacks, the group is making progress, there has been good work coming out of related "task groups," and PAWG can still meet its oversight goal.

"The task force work has been fabulous so far ... You've overseen the development and implementation of monitoring plans, and you've done that very, very well. You should be proud," Mecham told PAWG members during the meeting.

"This is a joint effort with over 100 people involved, and I'm amazed at the great recommendations we've already made," Baker told members. "I have great hopes for the future and where we're going from here. I trust the members will do what needs to be done, because we've still got a great deal of work to be done."

Adaptive management

The Pinedale Anticline Working Group was formed in 2002 and oversees seven resource-specific task groups that focus on water, air, wildlife and socioeconomic issues, among others.

PAWG is advising the BLM on possible changes to the level and pace of development in the gas-rich anticline, which begins northwest of Pinedale and stretches about 30 miles to the southeast in Sublette County.

Each subgroup was charged with developing monitoring plans for its particular resource, establishing the process for assessing the monitoring data and making appropriate recommendations for any possible changes in management strategies.

The BLM's decision document approving the Pinedale Anticline project was issued by the agency in August 2000. The decision allowed for the drilling of more than 900 new natural gas wells to achieve 700 producing wells over the next 15 to 25 years.

The decision document included various mitigation and monitoring measures that were required for operators in the 200,000-acre area and some winter drilling restrictions on the anticline's mesa to protect wintering big game animals.

The document also called for the agency to take an "adaptive management" approach favored by the Bush administration. The process involves making any necessary management changes to oil and gas development as the development is occurring.

To spearhead the new adaptive management process, the decision document also required the BLM to form a special group -- the PAWG -- to monitor development and evaluate future drilling proposals.

"This is an experiment, but it's something that the agency very much wants to succeed," BLM Project Manager Carol Kruse told members during the meeting. "There is no template for the adaptive management process and how to implement the public into the process. We're very committed to having this work correctly."

More BLM input

During Tuesday's PAWG meeting, group members were at sharp odds with BLM officials over the group's mission and what issues the group would be allowed to study.

Members complained that they were not getting enough support and leadership from the BLM. They charged the agency was not listening to the collective wisdom of the group and often failed to acknowledge receiving the task group recommendations forwarded to the BLM by PAWG.

The harshest critic was Hedrick, an at-large representative with three decades of experience as a planner for the oil and gas industry.

"This is an issue of BLM leadership ... We're struggling, and we feel like the BLM doesn't encourage us and listen to the combined wisdom of the group," he said.

"There's a significant difference and a higher quality (of advice) with this group than comes from one person alone, and if you don't draw on that experience and wisdom, it's a big mistake and a move backwards," Hedrick said.

"I get the view the BLM doesn't really wish this group existed and have taken a 'don't confuse us with your views' mentality. I see a concerted effort by the BLM to not draw on the best guidance available ... I think this is a big opportunity being missed because (the group's) intellectual capital is not drawn in an effective way," he said. "I'm sorry, but I'm very disappointed. We joined because we feel like we could make a difference, but I sense the group no longer feel like we're making a difference. We're wondering why are we spending our time on this."

Robin Smith, a member of the group who represents anticline operators, agreed that more BLM input is needed on what is expected from the group.

"The BLM has not participated at the appropriate level to provide leadership and direction," he said. "There's a real need for more involvement from the BLM."

Winter drilling

Group members were particularly upset that Mecham had pulled discussion of a winter proposal by anticline operators from the Tuesday meeting agenda. They noted several of the task groups were ready to present their recommendations on the proposal.

Shell Exploration, Anschutz Pinedale Inc., and Ultra Resources are seeking BLM permission for a year-round pilot drilling project within restricted big game winter range in the anticline. The three operators are proposing a demonstration program to drill up to 45 new wells -- with up to 32 of the wells consolidated onto a single well pad -- in order to reduce effects on wildlife, habitat and air quality.

Group members noted they were allowed to discuss at past meetings a similar anticline winter drilling proposal last year by Questar Exploration and Production Co.

"That was a BLM mistake," Mecham said.

Mecham said the agency thought the group was getting away from its core mission and the specific duties outlined in the group's charter and anticline decision document. Those duties include developing monitoring plans, assessing monitoring information and then recommending appropriate changes to mitigation in the field.

"The whole purpose and function of PAWG is (to look at) post-decision mitigation to see if it's adequate to protect the resources ... I feel strongly that the PAWG has strayed slightly from the original intent of the process," she said.

"PAWG looks at that mitigation and determines whether its effective," she said. "The task group work has been fabulous so far, but you're sort of going off on a little bit

different track. The idea is a mid-course correction."

But Bob Barrett, another at-large representative, said, "It was my understanding the field was wide-open to discuss anything to do with gas on the Pinedale Anticline. I see the purpose of PAWG a little broader than you do. Why put a collar on this group? Anything we come up with you can reject anyway. Why not let this group go?"

Baker said the group doesn't think the BLM's control of the agenda is appropriate.

"The statement that our input on the Shell proposal is not welcome and was not chartered ... I can believe it wasn't welcomed, but nothing in that charter says that pre-decision documents are prohibited, and that's a sore point now for us," Baker said.

"When you don't have public input or education on a proposal like that at a federal advisory committee meeting, then at what point do you have it? Drilling in old pads with new wells certainly falls under our purview in my opinion," she said.

Bill Daniels with the BLM state office, who wrote the group's charter, said the agency was "extremely careful" to put "boundaries and limitations" in the document to keep the group focused on monitoring and mitigation.

"You have an assignment as a group relative to the anticline and all the elements that come out of the decision record, and those are post-decisional activities," he told the group.

"It's a grand experiment, and PAWG wouldn't exist if the BLM did not want to hear what you have to say ... The idea is to get your input and use it," Daniels said.

About the working group

* **How it came about:** When the Bureau of Land Management approved the Pinedale Anticline natural gas project five years ago, the decision contained the caveat that the agency form a special group to monitor development and evaluate future drilling proposals. So in 2000, more than 100 Wyoming residents volunteered to serve on seven resource-specific task groups under the leadership of what became known as the Pinedale Anticline Working Group.

* **Who authorized it:** The nine-member PAWG and task groups were established by a federal advisory group charter signed by Interior Secretary Gale Norton in August 2000. The charter was renewed in August 2004.

* **Areas of focus:** The task groups focus on wildlife, water resources, transportation, socioeconomic, reclamation, air quality and cultural/historic/visual issues.

* **Purpose:** PAWG was established to provide advice and recommendations to the BLM

on possible changes to the level and pace of energy development in the gas-rich anticline during the approximately 15- to 25-year life of the field.

* **Duties:** The group was charged with setting goals and objectives for monitoring field development; drafting of monitoring plans; development of a method to assess the monitoring data; and evaluation of mitigation measures contained in the 2000 decision record. Under the PAWG charter, the group is authorized to gather and analyze information, hear public testimony and foster communications within the region regarding oil and gas activities in the anticline.

* **Oversight:** Though the group provides advice and recommendations to the BLM, all final decisions on anticline management are made by the BLM's Pinedale field manager or the BLM Wyoming state director. Meetings of the group are called by the chairman or the Pinedale BLM field manager, and the PAWG agenda must be formally approved in advance by the manager.

* **Who's represented:** Group members include representatives from the Wyoming Office of Federal Land Policy; town of Pinedale; oil and gas industry; Sublette County government; statewide and local environmental groups; landowners within or bordering the anticline; livestock operators; and two members from the public at large.

* **Terms of service:** Working group members are appointed to two-year terms, subject to removal by the Interior secretary. Members may be reappointed to additional terms if the secretary so chooses.

* **About the area:** The Pinedale Anticline stretches from just northwest of Pinedale to about 30 miles southeast in western Wyoming's Sublette County. The 2000 record of decision allowed for the drilling of more than 900 new natural gas wells -- to achieve 700 producing wells in the Anticline -- by operators such as Questar, Shell, Yates, Alpine, BP America and Anschutz.

* **Issues:** The mesa in the northern part of the anticline has been the focus of environmental concerns from drilling projects over the years, including concerns about impacts to scenic vistas, air quality and crucial big game winter issues. There are winter drilling restrictions in place on the mesa.