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## Drillers want year-round access

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For the second winter in a row, federal land managers have approved a short-term exemption for a small-scale "demonstration" of winter drilling in critical big game winter range in the Pinedale Anticline.

The day after that Sept. 15 approval, a trio of natural gas developers jointly submitted another proposal, this time asking that seasonal stipulations be removed altogether and year-round drilling become the industry standard in the winter ranges.

Anschutz Pinedale Corp., Shell Exploration & Production Co. and Ultra Resources say a year-round drilling scenario "will shorten the development time period in all areas affected by seasonal restrictions by up to 50 percent lessening habitat and wildlife disturbances overall," according to the proposal.

Bureau of Land Management officials are moving quickly to process calls to remove seasonal restrictions in critical big game wintering ranges in the area, citing the many benefits of a year-round drilling program. The general idea is to allow the construction phase to happen without delay so the production and reclamation phases can begin sooner.

It also allows local communities to avoid cyclical economies, and companies can retain the workers who are so hard to come by these days.

Many conservation groups say they like many of the mitigation controls and wildlife studies the natural gas industry is taking on in exchange for waiving wildlife timing restrictions. But they don't like the speed at which the restrictions are being rolled back for what amounts to a "big experiment."

"The five-year study that Shell has committed to for pronghorn and sage grouse occurs at the same time as full-field development," said Linda Baker, chairwoman of the Pinedale Anticline Working Group, a public advisory committee set up by the BLM.

Baker noted that a study of mule deer indicated a 47 percent decline in the nearby Jonah Field area when that field was industrialized. Findings of ongoing pronghorn and sage grouse studies in the Pinedale Anticline are expected to be released in coming months.

In the most recent proposal, Anschutz Pinedale Corp., Shell Exploration & Production Co. and Ultra Resources agreed that the results of those and other studies should determine the stipulations by which the developers must abide.

"If the monitoring results indicated the activities were not providing the anticipated outcomes, Proponents (Anschutz, Shell and Ultra) will adjust as needed," the companies stated in their most recent proposal.

It's all part of the BLM's "adaptive management" strategy of measuring wildlife and environmental impacts as development occurs, promising to adjust restrictions as situations require. The idea is to allow development to occur under close monitoring, and the BLM and the industry can adjust activities to mitigate any problems that arise.

"That's adaptive management," said Shell spokeswoman Deena McMullen. "We're looking at the bigger picture. We would like the longer-term proposal because that's where we feel there's going to be a benefit."

Nowhere else in the Rockies are federal regulators considering such a large rollback of winter wildlife restrictions, and what's being considered in the Pinedale Anticline could be the testing ground for the entire Rockies, said Peter Aengst of the Wilderness Society.

"There's a lot of companies across the Rockies who are watching very carefully what is happening in Pinedale in terms of winter stipulations being waived," Aengst said.

Aengst said it's common for the BLM to waive winter drilling stipulations for one or two rigs by one or two weeks, depending on seasonal conditions and where the wildlife are residing. But in Pinedale, there seems to be momentum moving from the currently approved one-season waivers to a total repeal of winter stipulations.

"That's never happened anywhere else in the Rockies, so they are setting precedent," Aengst said. "I could see this getting replicated all across the Rockies."

Wyoming BLM spokesman Steve Hall said current conditions of the national energy market compel natural gas developers to move quickly because regulatory analysis takes time. Hall said this month's rapid-fire filing in Pinedale is simply an attempt to get what could be a two-year regulatory analysis process under way.

"The challenge in the Pinedale Field Office right now, and what we're trying to work through, is if we have areas that are in all likelihood going to full-field development, are there ecological benefits in trying to work on consolidating those facilities and in trying to get through that development and exploration phase to where we get into production phase where reclamation can begin?" Hall said.