

Casper Star Tribune

Nov. 18, 2005

Editorial: Necessary protections

There may be places and circumstances in which it's appropriate to ease winter drilling restrictions, but lifting them across the board for federal lands is a poor solution to a much bigger problem.

In parts of Wyoming, seasonal drilling restrictions can protect sensitive wildlife species such as sage grouse and migrating deer herds that already struggle to make it through winter.

Anschutz Pinedale Corp., Shell Exploration & Production Co. and Ultra Resources -- three companies that want to drill for natural gas year-round in the Pinedale Anticline -- have submitted a formal proposal to the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM is accepting public comment on the proposal through Saturday.

The anticline holds an estimated 20 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas, and gas companies say the shortened drilling season creates several obstacles to development. Drilling techniques that are more expensive but more environmentally friendly such as directional drilling become less feasible, the companies say, and hiring, training and keeping workers willing to work a shorter season becomes more difficult.

Questar Exploration and Production Co. General Manager Ron Hogan spoke about the seasonal restrictions earlier this year at a hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Questar, which first drilled in the anticline in 1963, saw an unintended consequence of the shortened drilling season, Hogan said. Rather than undertake environmental mitigation measures, the company used more well pads to quickly drill vertical wells, creating more surface disturbance over a longer period.

In 2004, Questar negotiated an agreement that allowed year-round drilling in critical wildlife habitat in return for several environmental mitigation steps, including directional drilling, in which multiple wells can be drilled from a single pad.

As Gov. Dave Freudenthal noted in a letter sent last week to U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and Ranking Member Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., Questar's compromise is a good example of when it's appropriate to waive seasonal wildlife stipulations.

The process involved significant public input, too, unlike last week's decision by the BLM to allow Questar to append its plan and conduct limited well-completion operations this winter. It's worrisome that the BLM approved this change in the absence of public comment, while acknowledging that the completion work will involve more vehicular traffic and noise than regular drilling activity. Such action by the agency is certain to fuel added criticism that the agency is chipping away at winter protections.

But a proposal to lift winter restrictions on drilling from all federal land is a far more worrisome matter.

America's hunger for energy is a long-term problem that won't be solved by quick fixes that scuttle sensible environmental protections. The nation cannot afford to address only the supply side of the equation without also reducing demand.

A blanket abandonment of winter restrictions could remove the incentive for companies to use more environmentally friendly methods when drilling in critical habitat. And as Freudenthal noted, it could even result in further regulatory restrictions down the road if damage caused by winter drilling leads to greater protection of certain species under the Endangered Species Act.

Winter restrictions -- and whether they should be lifted or adjusted -- should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The nation's need for natural gas is great, and Wyoming can play a huge role in filling that need. But no state should be expected to sacrifice something so central to its identity as wildlife is to Wyoming.