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BLM underestimating Jonah Field's impact on air quality, some say

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JACKSON -- Air quality will likely suffer more than federal officials are estimating in their plan for the Jonah natural gas field, some conservationists say.

Bruce Pendery, public lands director with the Wyoming Outdoor Council, said the Bureau of Land Management's estimations of air emissions are overly rosy, as the agency assumes operators on the Jonah Field will use newer technology to reduce emissions.

Namely, Tier II technology is cited as helpful in reducing air quality impacts around Jonah to 80 percent below original estimates -- a reduction pushed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"The provisions they are making are all tentative, conditional -- anything but binding or certain," Pendery said of the BLM. "They are trying to take credit for things that are at best a possibility. They say Tier II technology will be utilized when it is available, and it's not widely available now. I don't see how they can take credit for something like that."

Pendery said the estimation that there will be three days of visibility impairment in the Bridger Wilderness, for example, will likely be "dramatically worse." Several days of impairment are also predicted for Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

"There's essentially no real commitment in this (environmental impact statement) to reduce air pollution," Pendery said.

Mike Stiewig, Jonah project lead for the BLM, said the agency heard from both sides when revising the document, and some -- including extensive comments from industry -- said the BLM's predictions for air quality impacts are too extreme.

"The actual estimates that were made, that was worked out by the air quality stakeholders group including the EPA and Forest Service" and others, he said.

Pendery said the BLM's assumptions about using Tier II technology, which sets more stringent requirements for cleaner emissions, and using catalytic converters on engines, are "more fiction" than reality, and are "basically experimental."