

# Casper Star Tribune

March 15, 2006

## 'Blind rush' or 'balanced' plan?

By JEFF GEARINO

Southwest Wyoming bureau

GREEN RIVER -- Federal and industry officials say plans to significantly boost natural gas production from the Jonah Field contain adequate protection for wildlife and the environment.

The plan calls for an interagency office to be created to oversee and monitor efforts to help wildlife affected by the drilling activity, along with millions of dollars to improve habitat near the gas field.

But conservationists said the plan is a gamble that could prove devastating to wildlife and the environment.

"The human community and wildlife and fisheries community should not have to be sacrificed for this blind rush toward some unknown future that could be a disaster," said Linda Baker, director of the Pinedale-based Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

"This is a big loss for wildlife, because the wildlife of the field will die or be displaced into adjacent habitats that may already be at their carrying capacities," said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

In a statement distributed by the Bureau of Land Management, Gov. Dave Freudenthal said the companies, the BLM, and state and local agencies "tried their best to strike a balance" in maximizing the extraction of natural gas while minimizing impacts.

"The result we see at the end of the plan, and not the plan itself, will be the measure of success," Freudenthal said. "Frankly, I think that all parties want to see this work and work well."

The Jonah Field is located about 32 miles southeast of Pinedale in Sublette and Sweetwater counties and covers about 30,500 acres, most of which is public land managed by the BLM. The field holds an estimated 12.8 trillion cubic feet of gas, with recoverable volumes estimated at 7.9 trillion cubic feet. There are currently 497 gas wells permitted in the field.

The final drilling plan closely resembles the initial proposal from the gas developers, but calls for a ceiling on the total acres of surface disturbance. The decision document limits the total surface disturbance from the project to 46 percent of the field, or a maximum of 14,030 acres, at any given time.

The new interagency office -- to be called the Jonah Interagency Monitoring and Mitigation Office -- will be located in Pinedale and will monitor and mitigate environmental and wildlife impacts during the life of the project, officials said.

Steve Hall, external affairs chief for the BLM's Pinedale field office, said the off-site mitigation and project office would be funded with part of a \$24.5 million donation from EnCana USA Inc., one of the field's primary developers.

Hall said the office will measure surface disturbance and reclamation efforts to provide "timely information" to determine the impacts on the environment and wildlife in the area. The office will be staffed by BLM employees and employees from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the state Department of Environmental Quality and the state Department of Agriculture.

Hall said the office will primarily oversee monitoring and mitigation, both on and off the field.

As part of the Jonah infill project, EnCana is providing \$16.5 million for off-site habitat improvement projects and \$8 million for monitoring, inspection and enforcement activities.

But conservationists were wary of the office proposal and said the public should be included in the monitoring and mitigation office.

"I think it's very interesting that the BLM decided not to include the public in the public land management group ... I know it can get messy when the public is involved, but nonetheless, they always should be involved," Baker said.

"It's interesting to note that the monitoring that the (office) is proposing to do does not mention air quality, one of our biggest concerns... and we're concerned that (office) recommendations will go to the BLM with no actual enforcement power and no seeming concern for air quality," she said.

Molvar said that even with habitat improvement projects, it will be difficult to make up for the loss of wildlife habitat from the massive drilling project.

"Throwing money in an off-site mitigation fund doesn't solve anything, because there's no evidence that we have enough knowledge to create or enhance sufficient wildlife habitat elsewhere to make up for the loss," he said.

"Wildlife in this state are already being squeezed by a variety of new oil and gas projects, and new habitats simply aren't appearing out of thin air to make up for the accelerating rate of habitat loss," Molvar said.

BLM project office manager Mike Stiewig said in the coming months, the agency will focus on establishing "effective communication" between the project office and the many people interested in energy development in the field.

"We will establish a protocol to identify and prioritize off-site mitigation projects," he said. "We look forward to finding those solutions in partnership with the local community and governments."

Southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino can be reached at (307) 875-5359 or at [gearino@trib.com](mailto:gearino@trib.com).