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## Conservationists rally against drilling plan

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GREEN RIVER -- Pinedale Middle School eighth-grader Tracey McCarty said she wanted to find out about ozone levels in Sublette County when she began a prize-winning science fair project last November.

With the increased development in the Jonah natural gas fields in southwest Wyoming and 3,100 more wells planned, McCarty wondered whether gas development affected ground-level air quality, specifically ozone levels. So she set up an experiment designed to measure ozone levels at four locations around Pinedale.

What the 14-year-old amateur scientist found were ozone levels exceeding national standards.

"We got a shocking number of ground-level ozone from my calculations ... We measured ground-level ozone at about 182 parts per billion, and definitely the limit of what we should have in this area, or any area, is under 90 parts per billion," McCarty said Thursday.

McCarty joined a host of conservationists, ranchers and Sublette County residents speaking at press conferences in Pinedale and Laramie to announce the filing of two appeals of the Bureau of Land Management's decision approving the Jonah Infill Drilling Project. The appeals were filed by the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, the Center for Native Ecosystems and the Pinedale-based Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

Speakers at the two conferences generally panned the BLM's plan for the development of the Jonah Field. They said the development plan would harm wildlife and wildlife habitat, air quality and the area's ranching heritage.

EnCana Oil and Gas Inc. and other operators received federal approval last month to boost natural gas production in the lucrative Jonah gas field in Sublette and Sweetwater counties. The drilling project will bring up to 3,100 new natural gas wells, year-round drilling and loads of revenue to southwest Wyoming communities.

Federal officials say the Jonah project will provide about 8 trillion cubic feet of natural gas -- enough to heat 96 million homes for one year -- and generate about \$6.1 billion in state and federal royalties.

Infill drilling involves placing wells closer together within the field's same overall boundary to speed up gas extraction. The approximately 30,000-acre Jonah Field is located about 32 miles southeast of Pinedale.

EnCana spokesman Randy Teeuwen could not be reached for comment Thursday afternoon. But company officials have long contended that the environmental impacts

associated with infill drilling are fewer than with new exploration and development.

With proper mitigation -- and the use of innovative drilling techniques such as mat drilling to protect sagebrush, techniques such as recapturing gas that is normally flared and hydraulic fracturing to increase gas production from wells -- company officials believe they can responsibly develop the world-class resource.

Air quality, directional drilling

Upper Green River Valley Coalition community organizer Linda Baker said her group is concerned there is no timeline for the implementation of "better, smarter drilling practices" by Jonah producers, nor are the "certain requirements" for operators to use such "best available technology" as natural gas-fired drilling rigs.

She said the rapid, widespread development of drilling and related activities is having a visible impact on air quality in the valley.

"It is increasingly common for the Wind River Range to be obscured by smog from just a few miles away," Baker said.

"Our air quality is so clean and clear, it's second only to that in Tibet," she said. "We have 100-mile vistas, abundant and productive fisheries and healthy lifestyles. We want to protect this world-class air resource for future generations."

Biodiversity Conservation Alliance wildlife biologist Erik Molvar said the aim of his group's appeal is not to shut down drilling in the Jonah Field. Rather, the alliance wants the BLM to consider full-field development using directional drilling from existing well pads.

He said under the current development scenario, the project would entail the bulldozing of two-thirds of the Jonah project area to make way for roads and drilling sites.

"We're not proposing they drill any fewer number of wells or produce any less of the gas resource," Molvar said. He said EnCana can still get all of the gas without "bulldozing pristine landscapes and creating additional impacts."

Gordon Johnston said he worked for the Upper Green River Cattlemen's Association in the early 1950s and used to cowboy in the Jonah area before there was any gas development in the area.

"Back then, everybody would gather their cows on the ranch and push them out onto the (Jonah) desert ... We could ride for what seemed forever without seeing a fence, or another person or a car or truck," the 74-year-old rancher said. "It was too good to last, of course."