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Value of clear skies and clean air? Priceless

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Perspective

I first came to Wyoming back in the 1980s to work as a snowmobile guide and outfitter. I was from Minnesota and had spent my life outdoors, but Wyoming was different. One of my strongest memories from those days is of the clarity of the sky and the intensity of the views. These views still leave people awestruck, but many of us are seeing changes. In the Upper Green River Valley, these changes mean that more and more often a brown cloud of smog mars the area's spectacular views and threatens human health. It doesn't have to be this way. We can maintain our clear skies and clean air, but to do so means we need to use American know-how to make sure development is done right.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council and our partners -- Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Upper Green River Valley Coalition, and The Wilderness Society -- have filed a public appeal challenging the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) "Jonah Infill Project," which would allow 3,100 additional natural gas wells in Sublette County. We are urging the BLM to work with Wyomingites to protect the Upper Green River Valley's clean air and human health.

We did not take this step lightly. We are well aware of the value of the Jonah gas field: the employment it provides, the revenues it brings to state and local governments, and the natural gas it supplies. Like most of Wyoming's citizens, we benefit from these values. Common sense and science, however, show that we can both continue to work in the Jonah field and protect our clean air.

Unfortunately, the current BLM plan would lead to a number of severe impacts. One of our primary concerns is human health. The air pollution associated with this development is known to cause respiratory problems, particularly for the young, the elderly, and people with asthma or other lung ailments.

In addition, views will be obscured by haze for up to several weeks per year in the magnificent Wind River Mountains and will be noticeably degraded in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Mountain trout fishing will be threatened by the acidification of lakes and streams. And communities like Pinedale will see up to 113 days per year of increased haze.

Last week, four Upper Green River Valley residents spoke up at a press conference in Pinedale about the changes they have seen in air around their home. Fourteen-year-old Tracey McCarty says she has noticed that her lungs hurt now when she runs. Long-time resident Judi Adler expressed the sense of loss she has felt watching the mountains surrounding her home fade behind a mantle of smog. Public health official and retired doctor, Tom Johnston, said he worries that the increase of dust and ozone from natural gas development could cause lung problems for valley residents. And Perry Walker, a retired Air Force major, suggested that the BLM has failed in its stewardship role and is sacrificing the Upper Green to feed America's voracious energy appetite.

These opinions are not unique. Increasingly Upper Green River Valley residents are being asked to make a choice between a healthy environment and a robust oil and gas industry. We believe this is a false choice. America has the know-how needed to get this gas out of the ground without polluting our air, but the BLM's plan fails to use this knowledge.

Development can proceed in the Jonah field with less impact to our air and water if we balance our priorities responsibly. That is why we have filed our public appeal. Like a growing number of Wyoming people, we believe the BLM has failed to achieve this balance with its current plan for the Jonah project.

So far, the BLM's response to our concerns has been to state that it does not have the authority to manage air quality. The question then is, who does? The Forest Service has said they have no regulatory power. The Department of Environmental Quality is shirking its responsibility, and the Environmental Protection Agency claims its role is purely advisory. The buck stops somewhere and the BLM is the overseeing agency. Our goal is to hold the BLM accountable to Wyoming people and their families.

The clean air we have in Wyoming is priceless. It is part of the fabric of life in the state; it attracts tourists and helps ensure our health. We must protect this for our children and their children, even as we develop our natural gas resources.

Mark Preiss is executive director of the Wyoming Outdoor Council, the state's oldest statewide conservation organization.