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BLM draws fire

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JACKSON -- What was once hailed as a model in cooperation is now mired in chaos and confusion as a community advisory board in Pinedale is being revamped again by a federal agency, and members are wondering about their role.

Some members of the group have even gone so far as to declare the panel "dead."

The Pinedale Anticline Working Group, or PAWG, was developed six years ago as energy development began booming in the area. The group, developed by the Bureau of Land Management, was designed to bring community members and others together to monitor the development and make recommendations.

But this month, many of the members' terms expire, and rather than renew their terms -- as BLM has done in the past -- the agency has allowed the terms to expire and is seeking new nominations. The PAWG's federal charter expires in August but is expected to be renewed, but now there is a gap between all but two members' terms and when the charter runs.

Bob Barrett, a PAWG member representing the public at large, said the group has become "window dressing."

"I've gradually come to the conclusion that the PAWG is going to have little, if any, influence on the development scenario of the Anticline," said Barrett, whose term expired this month and who is not seeking reappointment. "It's obvious to me that the BLM is pursuing its own agenda regardless of what we might come up with."

The roughly 197,000-acre Pinedale Anticline stretches from just northwest of Pinedale to about 30 miles to the southwest. It includes the Mesa, home to vast wildlife herds and once-pristine habitat.

The area also has a tremendous reserve of natural gas. A host of natural gas operators was given permission in 2000 to drill more than 900 new wells in the Anticline to achieve 700 producing wells in the next decade.

Members of the PAWG created a schedule for recommendations that worked with the BLM's funding cycle. Now, with members' terms expiring, the group won't be able to submit recommendations for the 2007 cycle.

Dennis Stenger, field manager for the BLM's Pinedale field office, questioned whether there was a "gap" in PAWG's effectiveness because of expiring terms. He said the BLM is looking to put the members' terms in synch with the charter, but the BLM still receives the group's recommendations.

He said the PAWG still has two active members, and when a term expires "you're supposed to go out when their termination is done in two years and get new members." He said extending existing members' terms might not be fair to potential new members who want to contribute to the working group.

But some ex-PAWG members questioned why it is "fair" to renounce existing members' recommendations by letting their terms expire in a gap where their recommendations are not legally binding.

In a letter to several newspapers, five members of PAWG said the group is "dead."

"It is clear that the BLM no longer wishes to hear recommendations for Anticline management from the participants in 'cooperative conservation' mandated for the agency by an Aug. 2004 Presidential Executive Order," members wrote. "The result of this is that drilling will continue without consultation from the State of Wyoming, ranching community, Town of Pinedale, oil and gas operators, adjacent landowners, and conservation groups. There will be no participation in monitoring and mitigation on the Anticline, and our water, air, cultural resources, and wildlife will be the victims."

Diana Hoff with Questar, a company working many of the drilling rigs on the Mesa in Pinedale, said people may be frustrated with the PAWG because they thought it should have had a stronger role.

"That is a post-decisional role," she said of the group, saying it is designed to monitor and recommend mitigation strategies -- not help shape BLM policy.

Still, Hoff said there are other groups in the area working on issues surrounding energy development, including operators sharing information about air quality, and a local Pinedale group looking at housing issues.

"I think there's still avenues where conversations can happen between the different groups, and people can still deal with the issues of their concern, whether or not the PAWG is there," she said.

The future of the PAWG unclear. Applications are being sought by the BLM for new members. Stenger said the BLM is talking to people who express an interest in serving in the group, but is not actively recruiting members.

But for Barrett, the PAWG will have to go on without him.

"There's been hints of this, and it's been pretty well demonstrated that we are window dressing, that we are an irrelevant group and we exist simply for the BLM to show they are involving the public without seriously considering what our input is," he said.