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Plan calls for drilling expansion

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JACKSON -- The Bureau of Land Management on Friday released a long-awaited study that could dramatically expand natural gas drilling on the Pinedale Anticline and would waive seasonal restrictions.

The proposal was submitted by energy operators, who say the long-term proposal is an innovative approach to balancing energy needs with natural resources on the Anticline.

The proposal would increase development, from 1,139 wells now authorized to 4,399 wells. About 500 wells have already been drilled. It would also bump the amount of initial surface disturbance up from 4,484 acres now authorized to 12,278 acres.

But those new wells would be in intensely developed areas, leaving the rest of the Anticline more open. Current authorization for the Anticline runs through 2011, while the new proposal looks to 2023.

The BLM also analyzed two other proposals, including a "no action" proposal, which would leave the field to be guided by the existing 2000 document. A third alternative is a tweaking of the operators' proposal and would specify areas where year-round drilling would not occur, mainly in crucial big game winter ranges. That alternative includes similar well and acreage numbers as the operators' preferred plan.

In a November interview, Questar's Pinedale division manager Diana Hoff said the company's proposal "lets us get a lot more benefits than waiting and keeping under the status quo."

Companies coming forward with the proposal include Questar, Ultra Resources Inc., Shell Exploration and Production, Wexpro Co., BP America, Stone Energy and Yates Petroleum.

The BLM acknowledged in its study that the operators' proposal "could cause significant adverse impacts to the human and natural environments."

Linda Baker with the Upper Green River Valley Coalition said the new proposal "contains an unprecedented level of disturbance to Wyoming's mule deer and pronghorn during the harshest time of the year."

According to industry, the proposal aims to reduce habitat fragmentation, allow wildlife corridors, reduce emissions, and reduce traffic. It also allows communities to better prepare for the social and economic impact of a gas boom.

The idea under the operators' proposal is this: a planned area of about 19 square miles under development at any one time, and within a core area of the Anticline. This planned area would be fully developed, and would move through the Anticline field. According to energy

representatives, this would allow other areas on the field to be used by wildlife and to be reclaimed more quickly. When an area is drilled quickly, it can be reclaimed more quickly, they say.

But within that core area, companies would not be subject to seasonal stipulations such as winter restrictions to protect wildlife.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department, which has worked to stem the hit wildlife is taking with the energy boom, has said it might favor an alternative that concentrates development and reclaims areas more quickly. But the agency has also taken a strong stand this year against any waiving of seasonal restrictions, as forage has been poor. Representatives of Game and Fish were not available for comment Friday.

Peter Aengst with The Wilderness Society decried the development scenario as harmful to wildlife in western Wyoming and said it would set a dangerous precedent for year-round drilling in the region.

"What this is talking about is the wholesale removal of those winter drilling restrictions up there and setting this precedent of drilling year round on crucial winter range," Aengst said in a phone interview.

The current guiding document on the Anticline is from 2000, which limits new well pads to 245 through 2011. Under the two other alternatives, well pads would top out at 179 through 2011, and 250 through 2023. Most of the work would be through directional drilling.

Current development is expected to disturb about 5,000 acres in initial surface disturbance. Under the new proposal, there would be 6,845 acres of disturbance through 2011 and 12,278 acres of initial disturbance by 2023 on the nearly 200,000-acre field.

The document said socio-economic impacts from all alternatives would increase employment and would exert pressure on limited local housing markets. The development would also exacerbate the need for local infrastructure and services.

Traffic levels would increase during winter and year-round, according to the document. Industry representatives have said centralized piping would and has reduced truck trips on the Anticline.

The BLM also said all alternatives would lead to impacts on air quality, but no violations of federal or state air quality standards are expected.

The Anticline is 198,034 acres outside Pinedale. There are more than 450 producing wells on the Anticline. The life of the project is expected to be 60 years.

Hoff has said the amount of gas in the Anticline is about 25 trillion cubic feet, or enough to heat 10 million homes for 30 years. With the industry proposal, the field would be drilled in an estimated 15 to 17 years; it would be twice as long without it, officials say. Wells continue to produce for about 40 years.