

Casper Star Tribune

April 15, 2007

Public comments: Slow development

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JACKSON -- Public hearings on the Bureau of Land Management's proposal to manage lands around Pinedale found that citizens want the agency to slow energy development and do more to protect wildlife and natural resources.

Last week, BLM officials held open houses in Rock Springs, Jackson, Pinedale and Marbleton, and not one member of the public speaking at the meetings supported the BLM's preferred alternative -- a mix of oil and gas development with some areas deemed off-limits or off-limits to surface occupancy.

The biggest turnout was in Pinedale, where a crowd spent several hours speaking into the public record about the proposed plan, which is out for public comment until May 18.

"The reality is that this type of input is exactly what we try to solicit through the planning process," said Steven Hall, spokesman for the BLM in Cheyenne. He said helpful comments are those that bring to light new information that helps inform the decision-making process.

"It's not useful to view this as a popularity contest on alternatives," Hall said.

Many people said they didn't like any of the four floated proposals because they wouldn't do enough to protect wildlife and natural resources. That even included the alternative designed to be the most environmentally friendly, with more allowances for natural resources.

Gordon Schwabacher, a Pinedale rancher, said in a telephone interview the document doesn't do enough overall to protect wildlife migration corridors and calving areas in the Upper Green River Valley.

He said at the Pinedale meeting no one supported eliminating oil and gas drilling, but most believe more study is needed and the overall pace of development needs to slow.

"Everybody felt like this is going way too fast," he said, and the social impacts to Pinedale also need to be considered.

The draft of the Pinedale resource management plan -- a document that defines, in part, which of more than 1 million acres of land in the area will be available for oil and gas activity -- comes at a time area residents are also faced with several other development documents.

In December, a draft supplemental environmental analysis for the Pinedale Anticline was released. In that document, the BLM proposes allowing about four times more wells -- up to about 4,000 -- on the Anticline but in a concentrated, heavily developed area along the top of the Mesa.

And last year, the BLM approved a document allowing 3,100 more wells in the already developed areas of the Jonah Field. Land managers and state officials have acknowledged that area will be a virtual sacrifice zone for wildlife, and off-site habitat improvement was a key component in the approval of that project.

Those areas are also part of the BLM's Pinedale resource management area, and all alternatives in the latest plan indicate they are open for oil and gas development, along with a large area near LaBarge.

Big differences in the BLM's preferred alternative and the most environmentally friendly option -- Alternative 3 -- include the Wind River front area east of Cora, and a swath of land west of Pinedale. In the BLM's preferred plan, both those areas are deemed "no surface occupancy," meaning the minerals would have to be tapped by wells drilled off site. In Alternative 3, those areas are deemed off-limits to drilling.

BLM officials said in the Wind River front area, there is a lot of private land, and private landowners may agree to gas development. In the land west of Pinedale, there are already existing leases that have been issued.

The two other alternatives include a "no action," which maintains the current plan developed in 1988, and a second alternative that would maximize the production of oil and gas.



Mark Gocke, Star-Tribune correspondent
A natural gas drilling derrick and cranes stand silhouetted against a colorful sunset south of Pinedale earlier this year. The Bureau of Land Management is seeking public comment on a plan that, in part, will determine where oil and gas activity takes place in the region.

In Jackson, Lloyd Dorsey with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition told BLM officials the wildlife it manages in the Pinedale area is "critical to the greater Yellowstone area." He said the agency is "in a critical place" to protect the area's natural resources, including air quality.

"You won't get a second chance at a decision of this magnitude, and neither will we," Dorsey said.

Dorsey said the preferred plan does not do enough to protect air, wildlife and human quality of life, and does not set aside enough habitat free from development.

"Your decision should not relax protected stipulations to assist our sage grouse, mule deer and pronghorn as they struggle to survive," he said. He supported Alternative 3.

Alexandra Fuller also spoke at the Jackson public hearing, saying missing from the BLM's document is any thought from philosophers.

"The question that I think we're failing to ask is what environmental, cultural and social legacies are we leaving not just for our children but for future generations of other species," she said.

Fuller said "mainstream philosophical thought" believes humans can only thrive when government and environment are in balance. She said the BLM can't leave the Pinedale area to extensive development, as future generations will not know the pristine place it once was.

"Some of those philosophical questions can have us talking for perhaps years," she said. "I don't think that's bad. Talk a little bit more, drill a little bit less."

The public comment period on the Pinedale resource management draft plan closes May 18. Then land managers will review the comments and develop a final plan, expected later this year.

The agency hopes to have a final decision in early 2008.