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BLM has only one chance to get Pinedale plan right

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

The public and two agencies charged with protecting the environment have let the Bureau of Land Management know they're unhappy with the rush to develop oil and gas wells in the Pinedale region. It's being done at the expense of our wildlife and natural resources, which is unacceptable to those who value those qualities that make Wyoming unique.

BLM needs to listen.

Not a single member of the public attending four regional meetings spoke in favor of the agency's preferred management proposal. Still, that might not be enough to persuade the BLM to make changes, and time is running out to submit written comments on the draft plan. That deadline is May 18.

The draft proposal BLM prefers would allow a mix of oil and gas development, with some areas off limits to development or surface occupancy. Other options include maximizing the production of oil and gas; taking no action; and one that is considered the most environmental friendly. The latter would prohibit drilling in the Wind River front area east of Cora, and a swath of land west of Pinedale.

Meanwhile, state and federal agencies charged with protecting the environment have criticized the BLM's Pinedale Anticline supplemental draft environmental impact statement. The draft authorizes up to 4,399 more wells on the Pinedale Anticline, which is part of the 1 million acres that make up the BLM's Pinedale resource management plan.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality and the federal Environmental Protection Agency both stressed industry needs to do more to protect air quality and wildlife and reduce the pace of development.

These agencies aren't opposing energy development of the Anticline -- and neither are we. But the important goals of serving the nation's energy needs and supporting Wyoming's economy don't have to mean sacrificing other values.

BLM's preferred plan on the Anticline mostly mirrors the proposal industry wants: intense development on a 19-square-mile area over the next 40 years.

Why the rush? The minerals will still be there no matter when a final plan is approved. Lloyd Dorsey of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition had it right when he told the BLM, "You won't get a second chance at a decision of this magnitude, and neither will we." The agency owes it to the state, its people and its wildlife to make certain our environment is not irreparably harmed.

The social impacts of the draft plan on Pinedale, meanwhile, also need to be considered.

A BLM spokesman noted that the four regional meetings held this month were designed to gather new information that will help the agency make its final decision. "It's not useful to view this as a popularity contest on alternatives," he said.

Perhaps not. But when every single member of the public who shows up denounces aspects of the preferred alternative, the BLM should recognize that the proposal has serious flaws. The bureau will lose credibility if it ignores the public and environmental protection agencies and just gives industry what it wants.