

Biologist tells truth about BLM priorities

A year ago last spring, I wrote a series of articles for *The Christian Science Monitor* about the energy boom in the West. The stories were focused on the gas drilling frenzy occurring in and around Pinedale.

Veteran Bureau of Land Management field biologist Steve Belinda took me on a tour. We visited the Pinedale Anticline, where gas production is about to dramatically increase, and we talked about the precedent being set in the Jonah Field to the south.

"We've got a world-class gas play occurring in the same landscape that is home to world-class populations of wildlife," he told me of the 100,000 pronghorn, elk, deer, moose and other species that converge there. "I think we can have both without sacrificing one for the other."

Belinda was parroting what the BLM told him to say. Privately, he was seriously concerned about the way his agency was addressing the pace, scale and impacts of gas drilling.

"Come back to me in a year, and let's see if anything has changed," he said once we shook hands and headed in different directions.

As *The Washington Post* reported this week, Belinda out of protest recently resigned from the agency to take a job with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. Now he can do something he couldn't do with the BLM: speak candidly without fear of retaliation and seriously monitor the effects of gas drilling on wildlife.

The 37-year-old Belinda signed up for a tour of duty in the BLM's Pinedale Field Office in 2004 because he thought he could make a positive difference. His wife was from Wyoming, and her roots were calling her home. As a hunter and angler, he also was drawn to the abundance of wildlife in the state.

Professionally, Belinda had a unique perspective when he arrived in Pinedale. For years, he had worked for the BLM in southern New Mexico, helping to manage gas leasing that had swept across the Permian Basin.

"If only we could go back in time and apply the knowledge that we have today about impacts, things might be different there," he told me. "But over the decades, because of our own ignorance, opportunities were squandered in the Permian. I hope the same thing doesn't happen here."

What gets printed in a newspaper often doesn't tell the whole story. Inside the BLM offices in Pinedale, away from public earshot, Belinda has been raising concerns about wildlife, air and water quality in the face of incredible political pressure to place priority on

upping the well count and maximizing the volume of gas produced.

Ironically, the pressure is coming from his own BLM superiors. He told me last year that the oil and gas industry has a greater interest in being more sensitive on the land and a greater willingness to modify its projects to accommodate wildlife than the BLM does.

As a biologist under the employ of the federal government working on behalf of citizens, raising red flags about wildlife if something doesn't seem right was Belinda's job. But over and over, he was rebuffed by his superiors, who tried to alienate him as being a non-team player. It was pathetic, he said, that the BLM had turned its own few biologists into paper pushers, pulled them from the field and ordered them to help process as many drilling permits as possible.

"The BLM is pushing the biologists to be what I call 'biostitutes,' rather than allow them to be experts in the wildlife they are supposed to be managing," he told *Post* reporter Blaine Harden.

Despite BLM state director Bob Bennett's insistence in Harden's story that his agency is "doing our level best to deal with the impacts," Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal is among many who doesn't buy it.

Our elected officials should demand a real investigation. Take an honest look at agency budget and staff priorities. Interview biologists who are now afraid to speak up, like Belinda was, for fear of losing their jobs. Talk to independent biologists who have chronicled impacts from energy development on pronghorn, sage grouse and mule deer.

Most of all, they should glean all the insight they can from Steve Belinda. Already, a report from the federal Government Accountability Office has chronicled the BLM's single-minded focus on accommodating energy development over other things like wildlife and air quality.

It shouldn't stop there. Wyoming's Congressional delegation should call for additional independent review from the GAO, the Congressional Research Service and the National Academy of Sciences.

Growing evidence to the contrary raises doubts about claims from the BLM that it is doing its best, on behalf of the American people, to ensure responsible stewardship.

Best wishes in your new endeavor, Steve Belinda. You were the kind of conscientious civil servant we need working in government.



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