

Pinedale's gas legacy belongs to state BLM

Despite reassurances from Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne that everything's going well in the Upper Green River Valley amid escalating natural gas development, there remain many, many reasons why the public should be skeptical.

The fact is that things are not OK in the Upper Green, where the BLM is preparing to rubber stamp another 4,000 wells on the Pinedale Anticline at the same time serious concerns have been raised about the health of pronghorn, mule deer, sage grouse and air quality.

Secretary Kempthorne is in a tough spot. He didn't cause the mess that is being worsened. He inherited it. Kempthorne is under intense political pressure, whether he's willing to publicly admit it or not.

In defense of industry, it's not the primary mission of natural gas companies to worry about wildlife. Instead, they are very skilled at extracting commercial quantities of fuel as profitably as possible.

Where protecting the *public interest* is concerned, the BLM continues to behave like a stunned mule deer caught in the headlights of a rapidly approaching drilling rig, claiming it never saw trouble coming. If you want answers, try seeking them from BLM state director Bob Bennett who has assumed authority over local decisions.

As a pack rat, I have boxes full of government documents and reports. I'd like to share the following report:

"The rapid rate of resource development dictates that resource managers become familiar with the potential problems inherent in energy development and begin to implement guidelines to minimize adverse effects on the wildland environment."

It continues: "One of the major problems associated with energy development concerns the potential effect of petroleum development activities on wildlife, especially those species dependent on a wildland environment."

It goes on: "Construction of roads, drilling pads, and pipelines, the influx of people and machinery, and the development of construction camps and boom towns are but a few of the activities that create disruptions potentially threatening to wildlife not habituated to high levels, or the presence, of human activities."

When was this observation made? Answer: In a government report titled "Wildlife Management Implications of Petroleum Exploration and Development in Wildland Environments" written by Marianne Bromley in 1985.

It was published 22 years ago and it served as a red flag amid energy development that already was causing serious ecological impacts.

It's truly baffling: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality are deeply concerned about declining air quality in the Upper Green. Public comments have been overwhelmingly opposed to the BLM's plan. Prominent wildlife biologists, including staffers with Wyoming Game and Fish, have been outspoken with their concerns, as has Gov. Dave Freudenthal. So why doesn't the BLM seem to get it?

Industry says over the coming decades it will spend \$1 billion of billions generated in revenues on mitigation. That's laudable.

"No one's ever said there shouldn't be gas

development on the Anticline or Jonah Field," says Peter Aengst with The Wilderness Society. "There's a lot of gas there and a lot of profit to be made. Industry can afford to do a better job of minimizing its impact. But it won't do it unless it's compelled by agencies which require it."

Let us return to the report I mentioned earlier. "Begin to implement guidelines to minimize adverse effects on the wildland environment" is not the same thing as refusing to prevent damage from happening and then throwing small amounts of money at the problem after the fact.

What this passage means is preempting problems, changing course, and applying real adaptive management techniques. Adaptive management does not mean expecting wild pronghorn, mule deer and sage grouse to either co-exist with an expanding footprint of development or perish, but, rather, requiring development to adapt to the critical needs of wildlife.

Why doesn't the BLM get it? Here's my take: No one individual or group of individuals in the agency are ultimately held accountable for the decisions they make, but they should be. Most BLM managers will be long gone and will not have to answer to local citizens when the game herds decline, hunting seasons are scaled back and there's haze in the air.

Today, the legacy of gas development in the Upper Green belongs to the BLM's state office. Thirty years from now, remember the people who were in charge.



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