

Direct comment on Sublette plan

Given the Bureau of Land Management's miserable track record of maintaining balance in the face of the ongoing gas boom in Sublette County, valley residents must weigh in on the agency's Pinedale Resource Management Plan. Before the June 18 deadline, residents should protest a document that provides insufficient protection for the natural values and lifestyles that are the foundation to the character of our southern neighbors. Sublette is home to a North American Serengeti of antelope, elk, deer and sage grouse, all wandering among spectacular ranches and blue-ribbon fisheries in the shadow of world-famous mountains.

Here's what's wrong with the way the BLM does business. Ordered by Washington to remove roadblocks, even traffic signs, that slow energy development, the agency has been on a wholesale leasing program, offering development rights to energy companies at an unprecedented rate. When wildcat wells hit gas, the government has agreed to massive development plans. Once the outlines of a field were defined, back came the companies for a second round. What seemed at first like an acceptable density of well pads was suddenly doubled with "infill" projects in a shameless shell game. Even well-meaning public officials like Gov. Dave Freudenthal had little ground on which to protest this nickle-and-dime approach.

Along the way, the BLM pushed aside worries about sage grouse and wildlife winter habitat. The agency refuses to limit air pollution in the neighboring Bridger, Fitzpatrick and Popo Agie wilderness areas, protected by Congress as pristine. It won't require best practices – directional drilling in the Jonah Field and no winter drilling on big-game winter range on the Pinedale Anticline – that make environmental sense. And it refuses to consider a phased development scheme that would leave parts of the county at rest until development elsewhere has been completed and its disturbances restored.

All of which means there is only one approach the BLM should take with its Pinedale plan. That would be not to lease the entire Wind River front, the Green River upstream from Warren Bridge, areas along the Hoback Rim, the Ryegrass and Cottonwood areas and winter wildlife habitat south of Big Piney. Of course, that alternative doesn't exist in the BLM plan. The agency continues to insist that it can protect with administrative rules world-class wildlife and environmental values on land it leases to energy companies. "Trust us," it says. "Not again," should be the answer. Once leased, it's lost.