



COMMENTARY

Taking Charge of Our Future

By Rollin Sparrowe

Perry Walker's *Roundup* article "Leadership and the Gas Field" referred to ideas about stakeholder involvement in charting the course for the future of Sublette County. It is time for those who care about this Upper Green River country and its way of life to take charge of our own interests in its future. The issues are clear – keeping air and water quality, sustaining wildlife, keeping the traditions of hunting and fishing, and holding on to the way we live our lives on ranches and in towns in this wonderful place.

What is the problem? We have little voice in the pace, scope, and nature of the energy development that has quickly become such a pervasive influence here. Our government is not doing the job of balancing the need to develop energy with the need to sustain air, water, wildlife, and our way of life. Highly visible public processes, like the NEPA environmental evaluations and the PAWG monitoring programs, have little or no impact on development decisions. When have any of us seen a significant response – a real change in managing development – from all our letters and comments? PAWG has received a midcourse redirection to provide advice only after development decisions are made. A bureaucrat now attends PAWG meetings as a watchdog and wrings his hands when a topic is discussed that he finds inappropriate!

After a year and a half of PAWG deliberations many participants have concluded that BLM isn't as responsive as the gas companies. There are companies who are thinking more broadly, willing to listen to possible solutions, and even spend money to try to lessen impact or restore affected resource values. They know we need more from them than 4-H contributions. They will be here in Sublette County a long time and we need to communicate with them and learn to work with them as closely as possible.

Let's be clear about wildlife impacts – my personal area of expertise. The studies on sage grouse and mule deer and pronghorn were designed deliberately to provide data – almost the first time anywhere – before development so the data could be used to evaluate energy impacts. This rare baseline information and current studies are showing serious negative impacts on your wildlife. Recent attempts to characterize the work as "preliminary" are misguided. Certainly there is more to learn about total impact and whether animals will recover in the future, but the impacts are clear now – and they call for action or they will get worse. We know from Jonah and the Anticline mainly how not to develop and keep wildlife and we should not continue that mistake.

Interested citizens have gotten several wakeup calls in the last few months. Winter drilling has been segmentally escalated by BLM authorization – first as "experiments" or "demonstrations". The day after the second authorization, operators filed for complete relief from winter restrictions for wildlife on the Anticline. Then, industry and BLM held public meetings to discuss win-

ter drilling without acknowledging more exceptions which were granted by BLM without public comment. Hoback Ranches homeowners got their wakeup call when BLM negotiated their future for drilling around 40 homes – without notice to home owners. How can there be a trust relationship with behavior like this?

What is the solution to the knowledge that we can't trust our government to be open and honest with us and that the Secretary of the Interior's own Federal Advisory Committee Act PAWG is being strongly limited and controlled by BLM? An obvious answer is to take matters into our own hands – and here is one way to do it.

We can start to work together as stakeholders in the future of Sublette County. Hold facilitated meetings to establish our own ground rules and set our own objectives. Establish our own relationship with industry. Bring in the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Department of Environmental Quality and any experts we need – on our terms to advise us or provide information. And, yes, ask the BLM to work with us openly and honestly on our terms.

A first task would be to develop together a vision of what we want Sublette County to look like in the future. There are lots of resources – The Sonoran Institute study, PAWG Task Group reports, etc. We would need more direct future development information with maps – than BLM or industry has provided. Then we bore in on specific needs for people, wildlife, air, water and others. Identify the most current problems to be faced and work directly with industry – with advice from agencies as needed – to set priorities for solutions. Maybe we would decide that a broad plan for conserving the Upper Green would be useful.

Where would we get power without a direct government connection? I argue we have little now because of our government. If we have a broad base of active stakeholders, we would need to maintain direct lines of regular communication to the governor, state agencies, the Congressional delegation, BLM at the local, state, and national levels, and the Secretary of the Interior. We would have to be ready to take our reasonable arguments, our direct advice, and occasionally our outrage to all those elected and appointed officials. Our power would come from ourselves and our continued presence on the issues.

This is a lot of work – but it can be done. There is a good chance some in industry would relate better to this concept. How much do we want to shape our future? How long are we willing to be kept busy with false promises (and meetings that waste our time) when we could take charge ourselves? This is the era of "locally led" solutions – we should take that initiative! What will the future of Sublette County look like if we don't?

Rollin Sparrowe, of Daniel, spent his career as a wildlife biologist and currently is the head of the Wildlife Task Group for the Pinedale Anticline Working Group