

Adobe Town vote stirs debate

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Designation of Adobe Town as "very rare or uncommon" could "serve as a lever" to encourage Congress to declare the area of southwest Wyoming as wilderness, the Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation says.

But members of the Wyoming Environmental Quality Council, which voted 5-1 in favor of the "very rare or uncommon" designation Wednesday, rejected arguments that it would unduly impede energy development and agricultural use of the area.

In fact, council members said their designation may have little actual impact.

"In many ways, this doesn't change any current use" in the area, said council member Sara Flitner. "I'm convinced we're not imposing any obstacles for (oil and gas) use."

Council member Dennis Boal agreed.

"I'm under no illusion the designation does much, because it really doesn't," he said. "But if it is true, if it really is uncommon and rare out there, then we're just saying ... (mineral development) ought to be undertaken with more scrutiny. But I don't think this designation will cause a bump in the road (for development)."

The new designation covers 180,000 acres in the Adobe Town area, most of it owned by the federal government and managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Some industry officials opposed the designation and said a huge portion of Adobe Town is already off-limits to oil and gas development within a BLM wilderness study area. They also worried the designation could affect the pace and level of future oil and gas development on valid leases on those areas outside the study area.

Agriculture officials also expressed concern about how the petition could affect private property use on lands located within checkerboard areas covered by the designation.

In a news release after the decision, the Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation said many of its members use the private and federal lands encompassed in the "very rare and uncommon" designation area. Livestock grazing is a primary use.

"The economy of that area in Wyoming is going to be potentially stagnated," Farm Bureau Director of Public and Governmental Affairs Brett Moline said in the release. "We fear this designation may facilitate additional rules and regulations in the future that will reduce utilization of natural resources in the area, including livestock grazing and mineral production, leading to non-use which isn't in the best interest of the resource or Wyoming."

The "very rare or uncommon" petition was submitted to the Environmental Quality Council by the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and seven other conservation organizations.

Biodiversity executive director Erik Molvar, who spearheaded the petition effort, applauded the council's decision and said it will confer protection on a key piece of Wyoming's natural heritage.

"This designation is a major victory for the crown jewel in Wyoming's most spectacular landscape," he said.

"The council sent a very clear message that these lands should be saved, that they have special values that need to be protected ... and that they are not satisfied the Bureau of Land Management is going to provide that protection," Molvar said after the meeting. "Now the BLM should follow suit by withdrawing the area from future oil and gas leasing."

One council member, David Searle, did not participate or vote because his employer has oil and gas leases in the area. Council member John Morris cast the lone vote against the resolution.

Morris agreed there are many rare and uncommon areas within Adobe Town, but expressed concern about including so much acreage in the designation.

"I have reservations about putting a stigma on such a large area," he said.

But the other council members said the designation was warranted.

"If you live in Wyoming, it's hard to escape the compelling feeling that all of our (open) spaces are subject to impact from industrial use," Boal said. "There's a ... growing awareness that we need to do some things to provide protections for areas that are unique and uncommon."

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