

BLM report: Drilling would boost gas leakage

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RAWLINS (AP) -- A court challenge to increased coal-bed methane development on the Atlantic Rim has yielded a document that contradicts the Bureau of Land Management's public position on whether new drilling will cause more gas seepage from the ground.

Erik Molvar, wildlife biologist with Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, said court records resulting from a lawsuit filed by his organization and four other groups contain a document from the BLM about how drilling has boosted the number of methane gas seeps on the Atlantic Rim.

The lawsuit was filed after the BLM approved a 2,000-well project on Atlantic Rim, on the eastern edge of the Red Desert in southern Wyoming.

Rawlins BLM Field Manager Patrick Madigan told the Rawlins Daily Times that he would withhold comment until he could talk to agency experts on the issue.

The BLM document, prepared by a petroleum engineer, states that when BLM officials toured the area, they found the level of activity at known methane gas seep sites had "increased dramatically since the commencement of coal-bed methane" development "in the immediate vicinity."

BLM officials and others who have looked at the methane seeps agree that some seeps have been in the area for years. Dispute centers on the recent increased activity witnessed at those seeps.

BLM officials publicly have said the amount of gas coming from the methane seeps has varied, but they also say the methane activity doesn't appear to be associated with the reinjection of produced water from the coal-bed methane drilling process.

That's where Molvar and others disagree with the BLM. And Molvar says the BLM document also disagrees.

"Their report says coal-bed methane drilling has played a role," he said. "This document is pretty convincing that the BLM knew and failed to provide it as part of their analysis of impact.

"It's a real measure of the amount of irresponsibility on the part of the BLM and what's happening with the BLM in their attempt to approve oil and gas drilling with great speed," Molvar said.

The BLM document states that "it is likely" that future coal-bed methane development "may cause increased quantities of gas to be emitted from the known seeps. It is also possible that there exist other seeps within the (Atlantic Rim project area) that are yet to be discovered."

That document further suggests that Anadarko and its partners "should play a major financial role in the backing of any future monitoring, mitigation and remediation measures ..."

Molvar is worried what could happen to the level of gas escaping from the ground once full-scale development begins, considering that the exploratory phase has resulted in more gas leaking from the ground.

Molvar and Ron Richards, a former oil and gas executive, also both voiced concern about leaking gas and global warming. Richards was the founder of Western Oil and Gas Resources, which has since been purchased by Anadarko.

"It is just indisputable that the biggest impact from these methane seeps is the global warming impact, and it is totally ignored," Richards said. "Nobody has made any studies about how much gas is being released or what areas you can expect it in."

The internal BLM document states the increase in gas seep emissions could damage the atmosphere because of an elevated emission of coal-bed gases.