

# Coalition protests Little Mountain wells

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GREEN RIVER -- People of faith have joined with hunters and blue-collar workers in southwest Wyoming to protest a small exploratory drilling project proposed south of Rock Springs.

Oklahoma-based Devon Energy Co. proposes to drill two exploratory wildcat wells near Little Mountain in Sweetwater County, according to company and federal officials.

The loose church/blue collar alliance said the Baxter Natural Gas Exploration Project will threaten an area prized for its elk hunting, scenic values and cutthroat trout fisheries.

The two-well gas project would be located in the Bureau of Land Management's Red Creek and Sage Creek management areas. The areas are located east of the popular Flaming Gorge Reservoir and west of the area known as Adobe Town. The site is accessed from U.S. Highway 191 South.

Officials with the Wyoming Association of Churches and local labor leaders expressed concern over the deep gas drilling activity that would occur at a site about a mile southeast of Parea Butte and in the shadows of local landmark Little Mountain.

"We're really concerned that if these wildcat wells prove up, there's going to be a big rush to build hundreds or even thousands of wells in the area, just like the Jonah field (near Pinedale)," said Monte Morlock, United Steel Workers of America representative.

"At some point, you've got to say enough is enough and keep the oil and gas drilling to the millions of acres that have already been turned into oil and gas fields without expanding to new areas," he said.

But Devon Energy officials said Friday that drilling in the area can be conducted in an environmentally sensitive manner and without significant harm to wildlife and other recreational resources.

Chip Minty, senior external communications specialist, said the company understands the Little Mountain area is important to the local community and "shares the same respect" that is prominent among the public.

He said Devon has a "solid record of environmental stewardship" in Wyoming and has met numerous times with state, federal, county and local officials during the planning process.

"Through those meetings, we have gained helpful perspectives and directives as we have formulated project plans," Minty said in an e-mail.

He said the company is working to establish local partnerships to conduct habitat restoration projects, among other efforts. The company also plans to take measures to "minimize its operational footprint" by using existing roads where possible.

Sacred places

Devon plans call for drilling the two exploratory wells to an estimated depth of 10,500 feet to 16,000 feet to target natural gas deposits in the area.

Minty said the proposed project will test the feasibility of natural gas production and should help the company determine the extent of recoverable hydrocarbons underlying the company's leases.

Coalition officials said there has been quite a lot of drilling activity to the east of Highway 191, but the proposed wells would be the first drilled in the Little Mountain area.

The juniper woodland-laced Little Mountain supports thriving populations of elk and mule deer and is considered by some to be one of the premier hunting spots in the country. The area is also home to streams that provide trout fisheries for the Colorado River cutthroat trout and other species.

Wyoming Association of Churches executive director Rev. Warren Murphy said in a phone interview Friday the faith groups "are very much concerned" about preserving the environment.

"That includes everything from global warming right down to protection of certain areas of (Wyoming's) landscape, as well as green buildings," he said.

He said the association considers the Adobe Town area of southwest Wyoming and the Red Desert area in general to be "sacred places" worthy of protection because of their environmental characteristics.

"And of course, (these wells) will border on that," Murphy said.

"Our feeling is that energy development can be done, but there needs to be certain areas where it has to be restricted and preserved for anything from wildlife to scenic values," he said. "It's the essence of what this state is about."

Joyce Corcoran, association vice president, said Little Mountain and the Flaming Gorge area are some of the main tourist attractions in southwest Wyoming.

"(It) needs to be left the way (it is) today for the long-term economic benefit (it) brings, as well as the spiritual benefits experienced by all who visit the area," Corcoran said in a release.

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