

Comments sought on drilling near Rock Springs

By The Associated Press

CASPER - The Bureau of Land Management is seeking public comments on a proposal by Encana Oil & Gas to drill 85 new natural-gas wells adjacent to the Jonah Field in western Wyoming.

The new production area would be about 70 miles northwest of Rock Springs, with an average density of one well per 80 acres and a maximum density of one well per 40 acres, the BLM said. The project would also include support facilities such as access roads, pipelines and compressor stations.

Randy Teeuwen, Encana community relations adviser, said the field covers more than 70,000 acres. Of the 85 new wells, the company plans to drill 70 exploratory wells within a 6,200-acre core area, he said.

"Part of our responsibility here is we have to drill a certain number of wells in this area just to maintain our leases," Teeuwen said.

Encana has applied to drill the wells over a five-year period starting in 2009. The company currently has a 150-well-per-year drilling program in the Jonah Field, Teeuwen said.

Suzanne Lewis of the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance said the 70,000 acres of public land proposed for the project include important sage grouse habitat and pronghorn antelope migration areas.

The group is concerned that Encana will seek to expand drilling in the new field in the future, which could result in well densities similar to the Jonah Field, she said. In a statement, Lewis called the Jonah Field the "poster child for excessively dense drilling."

Lewis also criticized Encana's practice of vertical drilling, which she said is more destructive than directional drilling.

"There's no excuse for allowing wells to be drilled at 40- to 80-acre spacing, with up to 16 wells per square mile, when the same gas could readily be recovered with a maximum of one wellpad per square mile," she said.

On Wednesday, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality issued an air quality advisory for the Upper Green River Valley warning of high ozone levels, the first such warning in the state. Regulators said the area's intensive natural gas development was the likely source of the pollution.

The BLM's Rock Springs office is taking written comments on the proposed new wells through March 30.