

Controversial gas drilling set to start this month near Fortification Creek

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Drilling for natural gas will start in the Fortification Creek area northwest of Gillette by the end of August.

The final decision on an environmental assessment of the southern end leased for drilling stated no significant impact would occur and Anadarko Petroleum can start work.

Fortification Creek has been at the center of a debate between the oil and gas industry, which wants to develop the area, and hunting and conservation groups that worry about what drilling will do to the area's prize elk herd.

Controversial decision

The decision was made by the Wyoming Bureau of Land Management Buffalo Field Office two weeks after the public comment period ended. That has some conservation groups concerned.

Conservation groups were surprised following the BLM's final decision that drilling would cause "no significant impact," just a couple weeks after the public comment period ended.

Mark Winland with the Wyoming Wildlife Federation said he wasn't expecting a final decision until September.

"I don't think they adequately addressed, in the decision record, the concerns that were brought up in the comments I've looked at," Winland said.

Winland said the Wyoming Wildlife Federation hasn't made a decision on whether to appeal the BLM's decision and are still weighing their options.

Those upset with the decision have to appeal it for a State Director's review by Aug. 21.

BLM Buffalo Field Office Field Manager Duane Spencer said he wouldn't classify the BLM's decision as quick.

"I say not quick because if you talk to one side you would definitely hear it was way too slow and if you talk to the other side it would be way too fast," Spencer said.

Anadarko is not waiting for an appeal. In an e-mail, the company said it is moving forward with plans to start drilling 134 wells toward the end of the month.

Developing the area won't be easy because it is such a sensitive area. The BLM has placed tight restrictions on how the area can be drilled and what the company must do to protect the elk.

Originally, Anadarko was going to be allowed access to its wells once a month after the drilling is completed. Anadarko persuaded the BLM to allow three visits a week for the first six months citing safety concerns.

Spencer said no one is happy with the compromise.

One of those three visits must be by a privately contracted biologist who will evaluate the environmental impact of the wells and take copious notes for the BLM.

Anadarko officials have said they are carefully evaluating all of the provisions in the environmental assessment and how they might affect its efforts to efficiently and responsibly develop the area.

The drilling area is outside the Resource Management Plan area being developed by the BLM and Wyoming Game and Fish Department, but some don't think it should be allowed.

The management plan is meant to protect the Fortification Creek area from further environmental problems caused by the oil and gas industry.

Because the project is not part of the resource plan area, it is open to drilling. There is no reason to wait until the final Resource Management Plan is done before allowing companies to start work, Spencer said.

Prize elk herd

Conservation groups have told the BLM that development there will still impact the elk herd.

Ashly Roberts of the Powder River Basin Resource Council is frustrated that the BLM is only focusing on the area to be developed and not looking at the Fortification Creek area as a whole.

"This particular southern end is not included (in the RMP), but there are many groups pressing for the inclusion of that southern end in the planning process," Roberts said.

Roberts said this has been one of the fastest decisions the BLM has made on an environmental assessment that she has seen.

"Two weeks is a pretty quick turn-around time. We consider that a pretty rushed decision," Roberts said.

A significant concern for the conservation groups is that this decision will set a precedent for drilling in the area. Spencer said the BLM has several more drilling permits in the Fortification Creek Area they are processing.

One reason this area was approved for drilling was that impact in the area already has occurred from drilling just outside the protected elk range.

The wells are known as "fee mineral wells," and roads and pipelines already have been established for them.

Drilling inside the Fortification area won't add much more impact, because it already is impacted by the fee mineral development, Spencer said.

Winland said it is a good strategy by industry that could be repeated throughout the elk herd's southern year-long range.

"They can go ahead and develop on the fee minerals, then BLM can say, 'Well, the impact has already happened, so there is not more significant impacts because they already happened.'"

Nobody has filed an appeal on the BLM's decision, but the consensus of those involved is that the issue isn't going away anytime soon.