

EPA raps Anticline plan

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JACKSON (AP) -- The Environmental Protection Agency said a plan allowing more natural gas wells on the Pinedale Anticline should be revised because it failed to adequately analyze the effects of development on air quality and groundwater.

"The impacts are of sufficient magnitude that the proposed action should not proceed as proposed," EPA regional administrator Robert E. Roberts said in a letter dated Feb. 14.

The EPA letter comes in response to the Bureau of Land Management's proposal for two options to develop 4,399 new wells on 12,278 acres of the Pinedale Anticline in southwest Wyoming. The wind-swept anticline is winter range to mule deer and antelope.

The BLM proposed eliminating seasonal restrictions that protect crucial big-game habitat against winter drilling. Energy companies would intensively develop a core area, using directional drilling to access pockets of gas in other locations.

The idea is to allow energy companies to get the gas and reclaim the land more quickly, rather than dragging out development for years longer.

One alternative to the BLM proposal would increase the size of the core drilling area and eliminate seasonal restrictions, but protect a buffer area around the development for at least five years. The BLM would decide when to reopen the buffer area to drilling.

The second alternative would keep some winter restrictions but would increase development to allow for "full recovery of the natural gas resource," according to the study of expanded development.

In his letter, Roberts said the latest proposal and study "discloses the significant and unanticipated impacts to visibility that occurred" since the 2000 Pinedale Anticline record of decision that allowed the drilling of more than 600 wells.

Roberts noted that emissions from all sources operating in the Pinedale Anticline in 2005 were affecting viewsheds such as the Bridger and Fitzpatrick wilderness areas of the Wind River Mountains.

In addition, the current drilling and production has contributed to contamination of an aquifer used as a drinking source, he said.

"Further, benzene and other hydrocarbons have been detected in 88 of approximately 230 water supply wells monitored," Roberts said.