

EPA slams new plan for Sublette gas field

Watchdog agency rips BLM proposal, says past study underestimated pollution by factor of 5.

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency excoriated a plan for more wells on the Pinedale Anticline last week, citing deficiencies in the analysis of the effects of development on air quality and ground water.

In a letter Feb. 14, EPA regional administrator Robert E. Roberts gave a revised draft EIS a rating of "3," which means the study has a label of "environmentally unsatisfactory-inadequate information." He said the rating "indicates EPA's belief that the [draft environmental impact statement] is not adequate for purposes of our ... review, and thus, should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised Draft EIS."

"The impacts are of sufficient magnitude that the proposed action should not proceed as proposed," Roberts said. Further, the rating makes the project a candidate for referral to the Council for Environmental Quality, which is a White House watchdog on compliance with environmental laws.

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, late last year. The anticline is a tight-sands gas reserve beneath the Pinedale Mesa, located about 70 miles southeast of Jackson.

The windswept mesa is winter range to mule deer that summer as far away as Snow King Mountain and rises on a migration route for antelope that summer in Grand Teton National Park.

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.

Roberts dislikes proposals

One BLM proposal would increase the size of that core area and eliminate seasonal restrictions, but would also protect a buffer area, called the flanks, around the development for at least five years. The Bureau of Land Management would decide when to reopen the flanks 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 Feb. 14 letter, Roberts said the latest proposal and study "discloses the significant and unanticipated impacts to visibility that occurred since implementation of the 2000 Pinedale Anticline [Record of Decision]." That decision allowed the drilling of more than 600 wells.

"The NOx emissions from all sources operating in the [Pinedale Anticline Project Area] in 2005 were five times the analysis threshold set in the 2000 Pinedale Anticline ROD," Roberts wrote. He said air pollution was affecting Class I viewsheds such as the Bridger and Fitzpatrick wilderness areas of the Wind River Range.

"Given the unforeseen and significant impacts that have occurred from development of the 642 producing oil and gas wells approved under the 2000 Pinedale Anticline ... EPA recommends the revised draft SEIS provides a plan to mitigate the significant air quality environmental impacts resulting from the existing oil and gas development," on the anticline, Roberts wrote.

With regards to ground water, Roberts wrote: "The monitoring data suggest that current drilling and production activities on the [anticline] have contributed to contamination of an aquifer used as a drinking source. Further, benzene and other hydrocarbons have been detected in 88 of approximately 230 water supply wells monitored."

Conservation groups say the plan seems to continue development of the Anticline at a pace that is too fast for wildlife as well.

The initial BLM request early last year came out at roughly the same time as a mule deer study, focusing on the northern half of the Pinedale Anticline, that showed a 46 percent decline in the mule deer population since drilling began.

According to the supplemental environmental impact statement, the current Anticline project has also disturbed 252 acres of moose crucial range and has likely resulted in declining sage grouse populations.

Energy companies say year round drilling would allow them to get in, get the gas, and reclaim the land as quickly as possible. To review the draft SEIS at www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/info/NEPA/pfodocs/anticline/seis.html.