

Governor raps drilling proposal

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GREEN RIVER -- A small exploratory drilling project proposed for Little Mountain south of Rock Springs is a bad idea that could lead to large-scale development of a popular recreation and wildlife area, Gov. Dave Freudenthal told federal officials this week.

Freudenthal panned the proposal by the Oklahoma-based Devon Energy Co. to drill two exploratory natural gas wells in the area. The governor expressed "significant concerns" about the proposal in comments submitted to the Bureau of Land Management.

The governor worried about impacts on recreation, critical wildlife habitat, sensitive species, air and water quality, among others, and pointed to the area's importance to the quality of life for southwest Wyoming residents.

Freudenthal said he doesn't want the project to "trigger the full industrialization" of an "irreplaceable" recreation area. Although the initial proposal is just two wells, "the pressure to expand from two wells seems inevitable," he wrote.

"Any energy development, whether limited or broad, in the Little Mountain area is going to stir up a perfect storm of wildlife, environmental, recreational and social issues," Freudenthal wrote.

"That such a remarkable area is so near to Rock Springs and Green River, not to mention Flaming Gorge Reservoir, makes it a uniquely important place to residents of Sweetwater County, as well as the rest of the state and the region."

Devon officials said Wednesday the company shares the "same respect" for the Little Mountain area that the governor, state and federal agencies, and the public do.

Chip Minty, senior external communications specialist, said in a statement that the company shares the governor's viewpoint on the important role environmental stewardship must play in the proposed project.

Minty said the company is actively pursuing partnerships with local organizations for habitat restoration projects in the area and is continuing to maintain communications with the governor's office, state wildlife and other involved agencies.

"Our plan is to maintain a high standard of environmental stewardship," he said. "We appreciate the governor's comments, and we look forward to continued dialogue with him and other stakeholders as we move forward."

Freudenthal's criticism of the Little Mountain proposal came after a loose alliance formed in December to protest the project.

Officials with the Wyoming Association of Churches, local labor leaders and area sportsmen called the area "sacred and worthy of protection" because of its environmental characteristics.

Freudenthal said the proposal could put at risk past habitat projects, including efforts to restore aquatic species of greatest conservation need, most notably the Colorado River cutthroat trout.

He noted since 1990, the area has benefitted from about \$1.4 million in ecosystem restoration projects funded by private entities, state and federal agencies, including the BLM. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has also spent at least \$351,000 on habitat improvement projects, he said.

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