

Energy company says project is designed to mitigate impact on Little Mountain habitat, wildlife

Group opposes seismic survey

By JEFF GEARINO - Southwest Wyoming bureau | Posted: Tuesday, January 26, 2010 12:15 am |



Currant Creek meanders southeast toward the Marsh Creek complex near Little Mountain south of Rock Springs in central Sweetwater County in this 2008 file photo. An independent Colorado energy company is proposing to conduct a seismic mapping project near Little Mountain later this year. (Jeff Gearino/Star-Tribune file)

ROCK SPRINGS -- A coalition seeking to protect scenic Little Mountain from full-scale oil and gas development is opposing a two-dimensional seismic study proposed for next fall in the area.

Greater Little Mountain Coalition officials said last week that the proposed 2D seismic project by an independent Colorado energy company would disturb a unique, high-desert area on the mountain that supports native Colorado River cutthroat trout.

The Little Mountain area south of Rock Springs in southwest Wyoming has been an energy battleground for several years.

Conservationists, laborers, sportsmen and church organizations banded together three years ago amid concerns about possible full-scale oil and gas development on Little Mountain, an area prized by locals for its scenic, recreational and wildlife values.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal, himself a hunter, was among those who have expressed concern about energy activity in the area, spurred in part by Devon Energy Co.'s proposal in

2007 to conduct a 3D seismic mapping project on the mountain.

But industry representatives have repeatedly expressed confidence that oil and gas can be extracted from the area without significant disturbance to wildlife and other resources.

They contend the seismic projects allow exploration companies to better pinpoint the exact location of oil and gas deposits underground. That, in turn, reduces the environmental impacts by lessening the number of exploratory drilling wells that might be required for development.

The Denver-based Azalea Oil Co. seeks Bureau of Land Management permission to conduct the 2D study on their Sweetwater County leases.

The company wants to conduct the 2D seismic survey for oil and gas resources in a largely undeveloped area located south of Rock Springs, near U.S. Highway 191 and Iron Mountain Road.

If approved, the proposed North Dutch John 2D Seismic Project would be conducted during July and August.

The project is expected to take place over 27 working days, and has been scheduled in order to avoid a conflict with deer and elk hunting seasons, which begin Sept. 1, according to company plans.

The survey would consist of the laying of three seismic lines totaling just more than 10 miles, according to plans. The company proposes to use dynamite to blast 125 shot holes to a depth of 50 feet, using buggy drills that would sometimes travel off-road.

Marsh Creek

Little Mountain is located some 40 miles south of Rock Springs along U.S. Highway 191 South in central Sweetwater County. The mountain lies east of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and west of the area known as Adobe Town.

The area supports thriving populations of elk and mule deer and is considered by some to be one of the premier hunting spots in the country. The area is also prized for several trout populations, including the Colorado River cutthroat trout.

The Azalea project site lies near the Wyoming/Colorado border and is primarily composed of sagebrush and juniper woodlands. The project site also contains four plugged and abandoned oil and gas test wells.

Coalition member Steven Brutger with Trout Unlimited said portions of the seismic study would cross through an area of Little Mountain known as the Marsh Creek complex.

The complex includes numerous springs and groundwater sources that are vital water sources for supporting trout fisheries in the area, he said.

"We're concerned that multiple types of energy development are creeping into the area without looking at the big picture of how we want the region to be managed for future generations," he said.

BLM officials said a 2D seismic survey requires less time and less equipment than 3D seismic surveys, but yields less subsurface data.

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