

Hoback wells would drill in roadless area

Plains Exploration says it has minimized impact on environment, will not fold and go away.

By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole News

Conservation groups say 17 well pads proposed for the Hoback Rim would put miles of new roads in one of the Bridger-Teton's largest roadless areas, which also serves as important habitat for birthing ungulates and other animals.

Energy company officials defended the new proposal as environmentally sound. Officials said they would limit development to 136 wells over the next 12 years, then possibly expand the project by increasing well density on existing pads or developing new pads on existing leases.

The Forest Service published an outline of the plan in the Federal Register on Dec. 12. Plains Exploration & Production Company would construct 136 wells on 17 well pads on between 10,000 and 12,000 acres of more than 20,000 acres that the company has leased on the Hoback Rim adjacent to the Wyoming Range.

The preliminary plan would disrupt about 400 acres and also calls for the construction of 15 miles of new roads and upgrading 14 miles of existing roads. The well pads would have 40-acre spacing.

According to Louise Lasley, public lands director for the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, scoping maps released by Bridger-Teton National Forest officials show that some of the new roads would intrude on a roadless area in and around Noble Basin.

"It's one of the larger roadless area in the Bridger-Teton," Lasley said. "The Bridger-Teton is basically a wildlife forest. That's the main value of the whole forest and roadless areas are important to maintain the sustainability and viability of these species that rely on unroaded areas."

Lasley said the well pads would also overlap deer and possibly elk birthing areas and some migration corridors. Just north of the proposed development, an area of crucial winter range could also be affected should Plains Exploration decide to expand in that direction. The land is likely important for moose and lynx as well, she said.

Linda Cooper, a member of Stop Drilling, Save the Bridger-Teton, said the new scoping map shows development beyond the original South Rim unit boundary and moves within a mile of the Hoback River. Scoping maps show seven well pads outside the original unit.

"We still face the same problems," she said. "We face the same air-quality issues the same wildlife issues in there, only even more so because now we know they're headed down to the river. The problem has just grown in size."

Further, the proposed area has little baseline information about wildlife, air quality or water quality to measure the effects of the proposed plan. For instance, Cooper said the water requirements for 136 wells could have consequences for the aquifers, which haven't been appropriately studied.

"We think they don't belong in this area in the first place," said Cooper. "There is too much at risk. There doesn't seem to be a place in the process for them simply to say that this is the wrong place to drill."

Minimizing the wells' impact

But according to Steve Rusch, vice president of environmental, health, safety and governmental affairs for Plains Exploration, the company has worked hard to make sure the project will have a minimized impact on the environment. "Some won't believe us until we do it, but [Plains Exploration & Production Company] has a pretty impressive track record in other sensitive areas," he said. "We think we have responded reasonably to the questions and concerns raised about the pace of development."

Rusch said the company has proposed 136 wells over 12 years, with four drilling rigs operating each year. After 12 years, he said the company would consider more development, including possibly doubling the number of wells on each well pad. The current proposal keeps well pads off of steep slopes and ridges, and away from creeks and homes, according to Rusch. Planners, he said, tried to design the development so that it would use existing roads, and ridges would block views of the wells from the Hoback River, the McNeel Elk Refuge and all but about half a dozen houses.

"The topography is satisfactory to mitigate any potential issues like runoff or things like that," he said.

But first, Rusch said the company will develop the three wells proposed in the original environmental impact statement. Plains Exploration "is not packing it's bag and leaving," he said. "We have valid existing leases."

"If we drill the wells and don't find any gas, we're done," he continued. "If we're successful, we have a plan to reasonably expand the development in that area in a way that takes into account the environmental impacts."

The next step would be developing wells to the southwest.

"If we had to guess where the gas is, we wouldn't think it's in the Hoback Ranches," Rusch explained.

As for wildlife, Rusch said planners have attempted to avoid known wildlife habitat, but have struggled with a lack of information.

"We're still talking to Game and Fish ... to work out the issues," he said. "We're trying to stay out of elk calving areas and migration areas. Forest Service and Game and Fish are going to have to come to terms on whose maps are right."

Freudenthal frowns on wells

In response to the new proposal, Gov. Dave Freudenthal has said that drilling gas wells in the forest isn't appropriate. Further he said the Forest Service has turned a "deaf ear" to the state and the community's concerns.

Plains Exploration asked the Forest Service to withdraw an EIS on a three well wildcat project in June so it could conduct a more extensive review of drilling in the area. The company had initially proposed drilling one to three exploratory gas wells on a 4.5 acres within two miles of the Hoback Ranches subdivision. The wells would have also required a four-mile road and drilling would have occurred year round.

At the time, Freudenthal, officials with Wyoming Travel & Tourism and officials with the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce all opposed the project. Freudenthal said the project could become a "Jonah in the Woods," referring to dense development nearby in the Jonah Field.

The company reconsidered after the Forest Service received roughly 19,000 comments from across the county on the project, almost all of which are opposed to drilling in the forest. Some said the environmental impact statement should examine the effects of a full-scale development to properly ascertain the project's effects on values like wildlife, air quality and recreation.