

New group tackles CBM water issues

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Tuesday, December 1, 2009 12:00 am |

Landowners and coal-bed methane operators will meet in Gillette on Wednesday in yet another new "working group" formed to address policy concerns regarding coal-bed methane water.

It's the most recent effort in a 10-year series of working groups, advisory boards and task forces attempting to tackle a long list of environmental and property right concerns regarding the practice of dumping coal-bed methane discharge water on the surface.

"Yet here we are still. ... It's the same ride with the same people," said Campbell County rancher Eric Barlow.

The working group is being convened at the request of the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, one of several agencies with partial regulatory authority over the industry. The meeting, which is open to the public, will be from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center.

In order to produce the methane gas that resides in coal seams in the Powder River Basin, operators pump water from the coal aquifer. This relieves the hydrostatic pressure that holds the gas in place.

The industry pumps millions of barrels of water from coal aquifers in the Powder River Basin each year, according to the state. Some of the water is used in irrigation and to water livestock. But the majority of the water is not put to a specific beneficial use, creating myriad problems.

Most recently, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found Wyoming DEQ's "general use" permitting of the surface disposal of coal-bed methane water to be scientifically flawed. But the troubles with coal-bed methane water don't stop there.

It's been a source of lawsuits between Wyoming and Montana, between landowners and companies, and a regulatory headache for a handful of state and federal agencies with shared regulatory authority over the industry.

Barlow said he intends to be a productive member of the new working group, but will try to keep members focused on what's legal and what the science bears.

"We should do whatever we can to accommodate reasonable interests," Barlow said. "We've got to quit hijacking the statutes and quit hijacking the science."

John Robitaille is vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming. Like Barlow, Robitaille has participated in many groups that have attempted to resolve coal-bed methane water conflicts.

"I don't know that there is any real easy solution," Robitaille said. "There's a lot of history with this, so it's going to take some time."

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