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Published on Saturday, July 21, 2007.

Last modified on 7/21/2007 at 1:55 am

Panel backs limits on coalbed methane water use

By The Associated Press

CASPER - A state task force has proposed what could be the first limits on the amount of water that can be pumped from the ground during production of coalbed methane in Wyoming.

The Legislature's Coalbed Methane Task Force has been meeting over the past two years to come up with suggestions of how to use the billions of barrels of groundwater that are being pumped from the surface during gas production.

At its last meeting on Thursday, the task force endorsed two suggestions from Wyoming State Engineer Patrick Tyrrell.

The task force agreed with Tyrrell's suggestion that the amount of water that may be pumped from the ground should be limited to the natural capacity of streambeds in the drilling area. If adopted by the Legislature, that would be the first restriction in the state on the amount of water that can be pumped during natural gas production.

The task force also agreed with Tyrrell's suggestion that his office be given authority to order the digging of ditches to prevent flooding of pastures with water from natural gas production.

Several landowners and their representatives told the task force that digging ditches to drain water isn't a good option. They said it would do little to address the fundamental problem of pumping far more water than can be managed in the semiarid Powder River Basin.

"If we perennialize these (ephemeral) streams and dig channels, it changes the entire hydrological regime that has evolved over eons," said Jill Morrison of the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

Tyrrell said the ditching proposal would give landowners another tool to manage coalbed methane water. He said ditches could prevent flooding.

On the proposal to limit pumping to the natural capacity of streams in the drilling area, Tyrrell said, "I don't see how it does anything but reduce the amount of water put into those channels."

Tyrrell had suggested that only landowners be allowed to ask his office to order the ditching. But the task force agreed with industry representatives that they be allowed to request ditching, too. Some expressed concern that allowing the industry to request ditching would allow companies to use the rule to try to increase flows, which have already altered many ephemeral water courses in the area.

Critics said that by suggesting digging ditches to handle the water, the task force failed to live up to its statutory charge of finding more beneficial uses for the water. State officials say more than 4.1 billion barrels of groundwater have been pumped out of the ground so far in the Powder River Basin.

The Powder River Basin Resource Council said it is concerned that allowing the ditching would remove incentives for finding more beneficial uses for the water. Representatives from Trout Unlimited said they would follow the process because coalbed methane development is increasingly occurring in areas of the state where trout live.

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