

Gov. blasts plan that affects elk

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Gov. Dave Freudenthal sent a sharply worded letter to the Bureau of Land Management on Monday, urging the agency to ensure that an isolated, prairie elk herd living in Campbell County's Fortification Creek area is protected, even as the BLM processes oil and gas permits in the area.

The governor's comments came the day before the public comment period on the BLM's proposed management plan for the 100,000-acre Fortification area ends. He criticized the BLM for not doing a more stringent environmental analysis of the potential impacts energy development could have on the herd and he urged the agency not to bow to political pressure.

"This process is a troubling illustration of the hurried efforts to facilitate meeting permit issuance levels dictated in Washington, D.C. This appears to be the standard outgoing administration gift to loyal supporters," he said in a press release.

He suggested the BLM do a more comprehensive environmental analysis of the area ♦ "something that should have been done before the agency picked a management plan for energy development that would have "no significant impact" on the herd's health and viability.

The governor had received many comments from citizens across the state and country asking him to protect the unique Fortification elk herd, a spokesman said Tuesday.

"Early on in the process, we were assured that the BLM would do a more comprehensive analysis," said Deputy Chief of Staff Ryan Lance. "We weren't thrilled to hear about the changes. And we are skeptical of this study that they did that supported a decision to say there will be no significant impact to the herd. We hope the BLM will refrain from issuing any drilling permits that would impact the area until a more comprehensive study is done."

The 100,000-acre Fortification Creek management area at the western edge of the county right above the Powder River is highly prized by hunters for its trophy bull elk. The area is at the heart of a clash between energy producers and those who want more protection for the elk. The area has a 12,000-acre Wilderness Study Area at its center and covers part of Johnson County and a small section of Sheridan County.

The BLM recently released a management plan proposal that allows for drilling on existing coal-bed methane leases using a phased development plan that it said will allow the elk herd to survive. But a BLM study also acknowledged that the elk herd numbers will be impacted, possibly dropping from the current 230 elk to as few as 46.

A local pro-energy development group, Americans for the Advancement of Responsible Energy Advancement, thinks the management plan will protect the elk.

"I don't know why he doesn't think the BLM is taking a rigorous enough stance," said Glen Wise, chairman of the group. "The BLM's doing its job; its got permits to process and when it fails to process those permits on a timely basis, that constitutes a taking. There's no scientific study to prove those elk will be harmed by development."

But a spokesperson for the Powder River Basin Resource Council said Tuesday that she was pleased with the governor's comments.

"I'm glad he took such a forceful stand," said Ashley Roberts. "We are aware that the BLM is under political pressure. The governor is not blaming the BLM, but he is saying 'don't cave in to Washington.' And he is saying this is a unique place that deserves another look."

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