

Drilling near Wyoming elk herd challenged

From staff and wire reports

A coalition of environmental and conservation groups on Wednesday asked the federal Department of Interior to reverse last year's approval of 87 coal-bed methane wells on Fortification Creek about 25 miles northwest of Gillette.

The eight groups say the proposed wells on the 100,000-acre area threaten a herd of 220 prairie elk that live along the creek. The groups claim federal officials did not fully assess the consequences of allowing the wells to be drilled.

"This elk herd is literally surrounded by development, with more development slated to proceed into its range from all directions," said Mark Winland with the Wyoming Wildlife Federation.

The State Game and Fish Department also worries about the effect of ratcheting up development in the area.

"Any road or development that happens in an area that was continuous habitat creates more edges," said Heather O'Brien, Game and Fish biologist. "It turns the area into a matrix of pieces."

The Bureau of Land Management signed off on the drilling permits in September. An initial appeal by opponents was turned down in December, so they are now taking their case to the Department of Interior's Interior Board of Land Appeals, which oversees BLM.

Officials from the Department of Interior and BLM did not immediately respond to requests for comments.

Other groups named in the appeal were the Powder River Basin Resource Council, the Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, the Wyoming Wilderness Association, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation, the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and the Sierra Club.