

**NEWS > LOCAL NEWS****BLM: Fortification Creek plans not harmful**[Print Page](#)**BY J.R. LOGAN**

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An environmental assessment released by the Bureau of Land Management's Buffalo office finds that mineral development in the Fortification Creek area would not have significant impacts on wildlife there.

The assessment focused on a 10,222-acre area within the 123,000-acre Fortification Creek elk range that lies on the border between Johnson and Campbell counties.

The assessment spells out a number of possible conditions that production companies must abide by in order to proceed.

The BLM has also partnered with the Wyoming Fish and Game Department to collar and keep track of elk within the Fortification Creek herd so it can monitor the effects.

"We have 38 cow elk with GPS radio collars on them," said Tom Bills with the Buffalo BLM office. "They take signals every five hours and we can download that data right off the computer. Through that, we have real-time data of what elk are doing, and we can take that elk location and compare it to methane activity."

Bills said the BLM will scrutinize the herd's reaction to determine what the impact of development is.

"The idea is to be adaptive," Bills said. "If we see something we don't like, we can act immediately. If after development the elk are not coming back to that area, it will affect future projects."

On the other hand, if the movement pattern of the herd shows that the elk are comfortable with drilling, it could loosen restrictions to accommodate future development as well.

Despite these measures, conservation groups in Wyoming say this could be the first step toward development at Fortification Creek that would negatively impact wildlife.

"I think the implications are pretty dire for this elk herd," said Mark Winland with the Wyoming Wildlife Federation.

His organization, and others, are concerned that the portion of the elk range that was analyzed in the environmental assessment does not adequately show the impact on the greater range as a whole.

"Biologically, it just makes sense when you're looking at an elk herd to look at it in total," Winland said.

Bills said the range was separated into northern and southern portions based on resources other than the elk herd found in the northern region.

The environmental assessment only takes into account the immediate area surrounding proposed development, but Bills insisted that they are taking into account the status of the entire range.

"This project is in the southern portion," Bills said. "(Conservation groups) are concerned that we're only looking at small project and not looking at overall elk range."

The Fortification Creek area is known for exceptional elk hunting and Winland believes initial development in the area will open the door to increased exploitation of the area's mineral wealth.

"We are now seeing development poking into that elk year-long range without really having the level of analysis that it needs," Winland said. "Frankly, in my mind, it's the first steps towards the BLM and CBM operators writing off an elk herd."

The public comment period on the BLM's environmental assessment ended July 8. The agency will next issue a final decision that will include the conditions by which development can move forward..

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