

Fortification soon will open to drilling

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Despite long-standing opposition from wildlife advocates and environmental groups, the rangeland supporting one of Campbell County's most prized elk herds soon will be open to coal-bed methane development.

The Bureau of Land Management recommended last year that much of the 100,700-acre Fortification Creek area near the Powder River be allowed to be developed for energy resources. However, the 12,000-acre Wilderness Study Area at the heart of the planning area will not be open to development.

But the questions still are up in the air as to exactly how much, when and where the development will occur.

It was clear from a recent Fortification Creek meeting in Gillette that some local energy producers think they can develop their coal-bed methane leases while still protecting the 230-strong prairie elk herd.

And it was equally clear that some wildlife advocates weren't so sure.

"I'm interested in resource protection," said Tim Barber of Yates Petroleum. "But there are some situations where you have unintended consequences."

He worried that some of the methods the BLM thought would protect the elk herd, such as limiting access to the herd's winter range, would push development into other areas and concentrate it.

Several members of a new pro-energy group, Americans for Responsible Energy Advancement, said they questioned the science the BLM used to analyze the needs of the elk herd. They also took issue with some recommendations of the meeting's sponsor, the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

"Why did you chose the 160-acre spacing, instead of 80-acre spacing?" asked Jim Barrow, a compliance specialist with Kennedy Oil. "I don't believe it is doable (to economically develop energy on such large parcels)."

A community organizer for the council, Ashley Roberts, said the 160-acre proposal was based on studies by the BLM.

Mark Winland of Gillette, who is a member of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, said he was worried that in the long run, the herd wouldn't survive the development. He said the BLM's own study concluded the herd numbers would most likely be sharply reduced "down to 46 animals" and that would lead to in-breeding that could eventually lead to the end of the herd.

"There are some areas where we just have to pay special attention and do it right," he said. "This herd is one of the crowning jewels of elk herds in the state."

He said that Fortification herd bull elk tags are some of the hardest elk tags to get in the state because the abundant forage and many springs in the area breeds large, trophy bulls.

He added that the extremely steep slopes in the elks' range, and the easily eroded soil will make it hard to rehabilitate the area after the coal-bed methane wells are played out. He also said the BLM's plan to do development in phases does not allow enough time in between drilling for this type of landscape to recover.

Rick Pallister, a spokesman for the Wyoming chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, said in an interview with The News-Record recently that he could not make a final recommendation on Fortification because it has become so political.

"We prefer to work on getting permanent land protection in the form of conservation easements with landowners and leave the political issues and management issues in the hands of those that possess the experts," he said.

The management plan for the Fortification area also includes about 53,000 acres of privately owned land, making private landowners a prominent player in the attempt to get a final management plan in place.

Darlene Floyd, a landowner in the area, said she was tired of all the studies and all the people coming onto her land.

"They've been at this for four years," she said. "Don't you think we know how to manage our own land? That's why the wildlife are in such good shape. I'm sorry, but I'm very upset about this."

TO COMMENT

- Go to www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/field_offices/Buffalo.html for more information.

- Or e-mail Fort_Crk_WYMail@blm.gov.

- Comments are due Tuesday.

- The BLM then will analyze comments and release a decision on the final Fortification management plan early next year, according to BLM National Environmental Protection Act coordinator Tom Bills.

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