



Press Release

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Group Asks for Stronger Protections for Fortification Creek Area and Crucial Elk Habitat

Sheridan, November 17, 2010 - The Powder River Basin Resource Council has objected to a controversial new plan by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to allow almost 500 new coalbed methane wells in the rugged and fragile Fortification Creek Area of the Powder River Basin. The Resource Council has asked BLM to re-consider its plan and insure the area's unique resources, including a prized isolated elk herd, are protected.

The group, as well as an area outfitter and a retired Bureau of Land Management wildlife biologist oppose the plan because they believe it threatens this fragile area and the elk herd it supports.

The BLM released a new draft of a Resource Management Plan for the Fortification Creek Planning Area in September of this year. Comments on the plan are due Friday.

The area under consideration is 123,000 acres located in the middle of the Powder River Basin. There are currently over 25,000 CBM wells surrounding the Fortification area, including over 400 within the elk herd's yearlong range that have been permitted within the last year and a half.

Retired BLM wildlife biologist Larry Gerard, who spent more than 30 years with the Buffalo Field office, said, he believes BLM "needs to get it right."

"BLM has prioritized the protection of this area for decades," Gerard said. "Unfortunately, in one fell swoop, they have proposed to dramatically change things and negatively impact wildlife habitat and other resources. BLM was careful to retain protective clauses in area leases, but has inexplicably chosen not to exercise the agency's rights to protect the area." Gerard went on to explain that because of permitting actions immediately outside the planning area in the elk herd's range that has already decreased security habitat by 30%, BLM is left with few options for this plan. "I have been objecting to BLM's permitting within the elk herd's range for over a year now. With over 400 wells already out there, the remaining habitat is all that more important," continued Gerard. "With this plan, BLM needs to proceed cautiously and conduct an Environmental Impact Statement. BLM cannot take a gamble with rushed analysis."

The Fortification Creek area is known for its steep terrain, deep washes and slopes made up of highly erosive, arid soils -- characteristics easily damaged by development and not reclaimable. According to BLM, over 80% of the planning area has severe erosion hazard potential and roughly 60% of the area has poor reclamation potential. The area also includes a 12,000 acre Wilderness Study Area and a much larger area of federal land that citizens want designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Over 68,000 CBM well permits have been issued in the Powder River Basin over the past decade but industry has let over 34,000 of those well permits expire. “What’s the rush to get into this unique and important area when industry has so many other options?” asked area outfitter Pete Dube of Arvada.

“Citizens are asking for review of this action because of the substantial impacts that coalbed methane development would have on the area’s important elk herd,” said Jill Morrison, a community organizer with the Resource Council. “Our members are also concerned about impacts to streams from produced water and what development will do to the area’s rugged topography, fragile soils and vegetation.”

Opportunities to hunt the Fortification elk herd are in high demand by resident hunters. An “any elk” license in Fortification consistently ranks as one of the hardest Wyoming licenses to draw.

Licensed hunter-outfitter Pete Dube and his wife have been outfitting and guiding for big game species in the Powder River Basin since 1984. “Most all of our leases have been impacted by methane development over the past few years so we’ve seen the changes occur right before our eyes,” Dube said. “Ranches have gone from remote, primitive-type settings to roads and well sites on every ridge and valley. Fortification is the only area left largely undeveloped.”

Unchecked development will surely ruin the quality of hunting. “This is one of those areas that I believe will not recover from development impacts,” Dube argues. “There are some places that are too fragile and special to sacrifice for energy production and Fortification is one of them.”

“If development must occur, phased and properly planned development with successful reclamation is essential to ensure some prime habitat is available at all times,” he said. “However, that’s not what BLM is doing in this case.”

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Photos of the Fortification Creek Area, the elk herd, and impacts of CBM development are available upon request