

**Powder River Basin Resource Council, Wyoming Outdoor Council,
Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Wyoming Wilderness Association,
Wyo Chapter of the Sierra Club, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance
National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council**

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

EXPERTS SEE CBM THREATS IN FORTIFICATION AREA

Wyo groups lead effort to protect elk, water supplies, vegetation

A rare herd of prairie elk, precious water supplies and sensitive vegetation in the 100,000 rugged acres of the Fortification area in north-central Wyoming would all be at risk if coalbed methane development is allowed to proceed as planned, a coalition of Wyoming landowner and conservation groups warn.

Local Fortification landowner and hunter Ken Burton said, “The loss of my water and the wildlife will result in irreparable damage to our ranch and the greater Fortification area, BLM needs to prevent that kind of damage.”

Eight local and national organizations submitted statements by a wildlife biologist, a geologist and a botanist and mine land reclamation expert—all Wyoming residents—raising serious concerns about the impacts of increased CBM activity in the Fortification Creek Special Management Area in the latest appeal filed today with the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

Fortification is a rugged and remote area in the middle of the Powder River Basin that is popular with local hunters. BLM has recognized the area for its unique values since the 1970s, including a Wilderness study area, a proposed Area of Critical Environmental Concern, a unique elk herd, diverse wildlife, beautiful vistas, steep slopes, erosive soils and significant cultural, historic or paleontological values.

The groups have appealed the federal Bureau of Land Management’s piecemeal approval of nearly 100 CBM wells surrounding the rugged region, which is home to more than 200 elk. According to public documents filed with BLM more than 500 CBM wells could be developed in the Fortification area. The appeal is a last ditch effort by the groups to force BLM to do their job and protect the elk and the unique qualities of the last remaining wild area in the Powder River Basin.

“I remain convinced that coalbed methane development in and around the [Fortification Creek Special Management Area] will negatively impact elk to a substantial degree,” said Dr. William Alldredge, a Thermopolis-based wildlife biologist.

Allredge also questioned a proposal, floated by BLM, to “monitor elk use” during CBM development and adapt management of industrial activity “where necessary.” “A wiser approach,” Allredge suggested, “would be to assure that habitats are protected and available for

the elk and curtail additional development until industry has successfully reclaimed impacted areas to functional sagebrush/grassland, juniper communities.”

“While BLM recognizes that the impacts to this elk herd are going to be significant, they continue to fail in their duty to protect this herd by allowing piecemeal development to proceed, this will be death by a thousand cuts similar to what is happening to the sage grouse,” said local sportsman Bill Bensel.

Bob Giurgevich of Sheridan, who holds a doctorate in botany and spent 25 years overseeing Powder River Basin mining reclamation efforts for the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, said his review of planning documents and permit applications related to the Fortification projects exposed numerous shortcomings.

Plans for restoring vegetation in disturbed areas were insufficient, he said, relying on too few seed types and incorrect plant mixes. Wetlands mitigation plans and erosion control proposals were also inadequate, he declared.

“BLM’s own recent internal report on reclamation showed that the CBM industry in the Powder River Basin is miserably failing in their reclamation requirements with an 85% non-compliance rate. The spread of noxious weeds and the failure to reseed are serious problems within this industry according to BLM’s own report. Yet, we see nothing to that requires better reclamation or weed control in the Fortification area which will be almost impossible to reclaim,” said Jill Morrison of Powder River Basin Resource Council.

Potential groundwater impacts of the proposed Fortification development also merits serious additional study, according to Walter Merschat, a Casper geologist who once worked for Gulf Oil.

“With the publication of several Environmental Impact Statements identifying negative groundwater impacts coupled with a plethora of water loss lawsuits and numerous complaints from individuals in the Powder River Basin adversely impacted by CBM dewatering activities,” he said, “the BLM should require better site-specific groundwater monitoring analyses and water replacement guidelines.”

Merschat also dismissed the use of a “circle of influence” around a well to artificially limit the area in which a well is believed to affect groundwater supply. “It is unfortunate that the COI has been adopted to define the limits that CBM dewatering activities impact groundwater,” he wrote. “Groundwater flows downhill through subsurface reservoirs and its movement is based on rock fabric, not a circle on the surface. Therefore, the aerial extent of CBM dewatering is more widespread and complex than a simple circle on a map.”

The coalition of groups working to protect the unique resources in the Fortification include The Powder River Basin Resource Council, Wyoming Outdoor Council, Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Wyoming Wilderness Association, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Wildlife Federation.

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