

In face of drought, ag group pushes for CBM water conservation

By *DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER*

Star-Tribune energy reporter

In 2006, more than 25 billion gallons of water were pumped from Wyoming's aquifers to produce coal-bed methane gas. It's enough water to serve 75,000 families of four for a year.

At a time when communities across the state are raising water bills, restricting water use and searching for new supplies, the production of coal-bed methane water represents a monumental waste of a valuable resource, according to the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

"Water is the lifeblood of Wyoming. And the people of this state know better than to waste it," said Bob LeResche, a Powder River landowner and chairman of the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

LeResche's statement was issued as part of the group's new campaign to better conserve Wyoming water resources in the coal-bed methane fields.

The Wyoming Geological Survey estimates 44.1 billion barrels of water -- enough to fill Lake DeSmet 30 times -- is associated with the state's total estimated coal-bed methane gas reserve. The industry has a different perspective from the resource group.

"Water is often in short supply for the citizens of Wyoming," said Dustin Frost, coordinator for the Coal-bed Natural Gas Alliance. "Far from wasting water, the development of coal-bed natural gas is providing a new source of quality water for literally hundreds of uses throughout the state, from livestock watering and irrigation to dust control and industrial uses."

Kevin Lind, director of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, said that view assumes that all the water produced from coal-bed methane wells is put to beneficial use. Some of the water produced by wells drilling underground to release the gas locked in coal seams is left in drainage ponds.

"The facts bear out that a very small percentage is put to use," said Lind. "Besides that, we are draining aquifers without any real knowledge about when it will be replenished."

Lind said the PRBRC has been passing resolutions since 1978 regarding the conservation of groundwater, including one in 1980 that asked for legislation ensuring that groundwater withdrawals for industrial purposes do not damage other entities that disburse the water.

"We recognized this could be problem back in 1980, and the state still hasn't recognized it," said Lind. "Economically, energy and agriculture don't compare. But we're talking about our future here. The government doesn't seem to be looking at the

future, but at the present income."

Freudenthal declined to comment on the PRBRC's assertions. He has said the complex issue should be resolved in a manner that includes all stakeholders, so he has reserved immediate action while the Coal-bed Methane Task Force explores several options, including gauging interest among industry operators to invest in a pipeline to pool water to a river or another underground aquifer.

That task has been handed to the Wyoming Pipeline Authority, which made a call for non-binding interest in such a project. This week, the pipeline authority indicated that major coal-bed methane operators aren't yet convinced there's an economic payoff.

Pipeline authority chairman Mark Doelger said the project needs support from outside the coal-bed methane industry, stressing the fact that the industry itself would not be the only beneficiary.

Several coal-gasification, coal-fired power generation projects are in search of water, as are oil producers pursuing enhanced oil recovery, said Doelger. Municipalities are also a potential beneficiary.

"There is a larger universe positively impacted by this," Doelger said.

The issue of conserving Wyoming's groundwater resources may likely only intensify as states and the federal government prepare to take on the issues of climate change. Reed Benson, University of Wyoming College of Law professor who specializes in water law, said the issue of climate change will likely invite more scrutiny about the appropriate uses of groundwater.

"Groundwater has been somewhat of an insurance policy, and I think climate change makes that insurance policy that much more valuable," Benson told the Star-Tribune.

Policymakers must ask whether it is worth using groundwater today if that resource might not be there tomorrow. Given the duality between agriculture and energy in Wyoming, Benson said it's easy to understand why any change in water law is controversial.

"When agriculture and energy collide, and the issue is water, you can see why the state has struggled to figure out what to do about it and why there hasn't been a great eagerness to change the status quo," said Benson.

Energy reporter Dustin Bleizeffer can be reached at (307) 577-6069 or dustin.bleizeffer@casperstartribune.net.