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TUESDAY MAY 26, 2009 :: Last modified: Thursday, May 21, 2009 10:05 PM MDT

Group: BLM still under-inspects wells

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The Bush-era push for energy development in the Rockies forced federal land managers to shift resources to permitting while monitoring and enforcement of the industry fell by the wayside, according to a new report by the Western Organization of Resource Councils.

The analysis focuses on the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's environmental inspection and enforcement program in six field offices across the West, including Buffalo and Pinedale and in four other states.

The Western Organization of Resource Councils issued its initial report in 2004, highlighting a low number of field inspections and enforcement actions. This update concludes that while the BLM has increased its inspection and enforcement efforts, the agency still has a long way to go in order to properly manage the volume of energy development that's now under permit.

"Inspection and enforcement is the single most critical activity to ensure protection of ecosystems, yet the BLM lacks resources," North Dakota rancher Donald Nelson said during a teleconference Thursday.

Despite BLM's recent gains in inspection and enforcement, "They haven't even begun to close the gap," Nelson added.

Wyoming BLM spokesman Roger Alexander said on Thursday afternoon that the agency had just heard about the report and had not yet had a chance to read it.

"We're going to need some time to read it and look at the findings before we are able to comment, even if we do comment," Alexander said.

Bob LeResche, chairman of the Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming, suggested that of all oil and gas facilities inspected by the BLM Buffalo field office, more than 84 percent were found to be out of compliance in some manner. The most common offenses are failure to control noxious weeds and failure to meet reclamation specifications.

LeResche said he's glad to see BLM's recent gains on the enforcement side, but referred to the progress as mere "baby steps."

"What we need is a large leap forward rather than just edging toward the issue," LeResche said.

For years, the BLM Buffalo field office has been under a mandate from BLM's headquarters in Washington, D.C., to issue at least 3,000 coal-bed methane well permits annually. The office's management has said the mandate contributed to a large staff turnover rate.

In September 2004, then assistant field manager Richard Zander told the Star-Tribune, "If you can handle Buffalo, you can handle anything. The stress is high."

The Western Organization of Resource Councils recommended that Congress fully fund BLM's

inspection and enforcement program and said environmental inspectors should receive adequate training and certification. The Obama administration's 2010 budget request for the BLM adds \$10.8 million to the agency's oil and gas program, but does not indicate whether any of the increase would go to inspection and enforcement programs.

"With the current slowdown in permit applications and drilling, BLM has a golden opportunity to stop paying lip service to this problem," Nelson said.

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