

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

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

GROUPS PUSH TO PROTECT UNIQUE WYO. ELK HERD

Hunters, ranchers, conservationists rap feds for approving piecemeal development plan

The rugged Fortification Creek area in northeast Wyoming—home to a healthy herd of rare prairie elk—should be protected from proposed energy development that threatens to shred the animals’ habitat, eight Wyoming and national conservation and landowner groups declared today.

Approval by the federal Bureau of Land Management of nearly 100 new coalbed methane wells ringing the wild area will begin the erosion of the elk’s habitat, starting a downward spiral that will reduce the herd’s size and limit public uses of the tract for hunting, hiking and sightseeing, the groups said in appealing the BLM action to the U.S. Interior Department’s Interior Board of Land Appeals.

“Given the recognized extremely important environmental values of the Fortification area, and particularly the value of its unique herd of elk, these impacts will clearly constitute unnecessary or undue degradation of the public lands,” the groups argued in a 20-page “statement of reasons” for filing their appeal.

The Fortification has been recognized by BLM and the public for its unique values since the mid 1970s. It houses a designated Wilderness Study Area, a proposed Area of Critical Environmental Concern and abundant wildlife. BLM’s Buffalo (Wyo.) Field Office recently approved plans of development for 87 CBM wells, along with associated roads, pipelines, water discharge and water impoundments, all bordering elk ranges within the Fortification area, the last remaining undeveloped wild area in the Powder River Basin.

That action triggered today’s appeal by the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Powder River Basin Resource Council, Wyoming Outdoor Council, Wyoming Wilderness Association, Biodiversity

Conservation Alliance, Wyoming Chapter of the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation and Natural Resources Defense Council.

“I’ve been going into the Fortification since 1962,” said Robert Sorenson, a Spotted Horse rancher and landowner very familiar with CBM development. “The wildness, beauty, ruggedness and hunting opportunities amaze me. It is unique and virtually the only unspoiled area left in an increasingly industrialized Powder River Basin.”

Wildlife biologist Dr. William Alldredge, who reviewed the BLM’s permitting documents and analysis for the groups, noted, “Because of the isolated nature of the Fortification Creek elk habitat, impacts resulting from CBM development will be very difficult to regulate or mitigate.”

“I fear for the future of the Fortification Creek elk herd under the BLM’s current mode of operation,” said Mark Winland, area native and Interim Executive Director of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation. “The BLM itself acknowledges that Fortification Creek elk are not using suitable habitat within 1.7 miles of existing development to the degree expected, yet they have approved development right up to their elk range boundary. This elk herd is literally surrounded by development, with more development slated to proceed into its range from all directions. The potential impacts to the area and the elk demand a level of analysis and a careful plan much greater than BLM’s current piecemeal approach.”

The BLM admits it has never done the required environmental analysis of CBM development on the Fortification Creek elk herd. The groups called upon the Appeal Board to reverse the BLM’s permitting decisions for failure to comply with the law. They also called upon BLM to proceed with caution and do the required analysis prior to permitting to ensure the implementation of practices to protect this unique and disappearing landscape and the unique elk herd it supports

“This proposed development would kill the wilderness, run off the wildlife and destroy the area,” agreed Liz Howell of Sheridan, founder and director of the Wyoming Wilderness Association and a resident of Sheridan County for more than 40 years.

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