Press Release

August 24, 2009 - For Immediate Release

Groups Ask for Review of Rushed Development Decision in Crucial Elk Habitat

Buffalo, August 24, 2009 - In response to the recent approval of a controversial natural gas drilling operation in northeast Wyoming, sportsmen and conservation groups have submitted an official request to BLM State Director Don Simpson, asking him to review the Buffalo field office's approval of the project and stop its implementation pending greater protections of a prized elk herd.

The groups, as well as an area outfitter and a retired Bureau of Land Management wildlife biologist who is calling the project "bad planning," oppose the plan because, they argue, it threatens the Fortification Creek elk herd.

The Augusta Unit Zeta coalbed methane project in the Fortification Creek area in Campbell and Johnson counties was approved last month by the Buffalo BLM.

"Citizens are asking for review of this action because of the substantial impacts this natural gas development project would have on the area's important elk herd," said Jill Morrison, a community organizer with the Powder River Basin Resource Council. "They're also concerned about impacts to streams from produced water and what development will do to the area's fragile soils and vegetation."

The Fortification Creek area is known for its steep terrain, deep washes and slopes made up of highly erosive, arid soils -- characteristics easily deteriorated by development. The area also includes a Wilderness Study Area.

The groups are concerned that the entire Augusta Unit Zeta project will be within the delineated yearlong range, including crucial winter and calving areas, of the Fortification Creek elk herd. To this point, BLM has deferred federal coalbed methane development within the yearlong range until a larger Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) is completed. However, the BLM excluded the southern range of the herd from analysis in the RMPA, and is now allowing development. This project will set a precedent, potentially opening a floodgate of federal development in this critical habitat area.

Retired BLM wildlife biologist Larry Gerard, who spent more than 30 years with the Buffalo Field office, said, he believes BLM has "jumped the gun."

"One of my main concerns with the AUZ Project is that it is considered outside the context of the larger Resource Management Plan Amendment for the Fortification Creek area," Gerard said "This is bad planning on the part of BLM because it will fragment habitat and cut off comprehensive options the BLM has for the larger plan."

Mark Winland, board member of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation also expressed concerns about the Augusta Unit Zeta project's impacts. "I'm just plain perplexed as to how BLM believes there will be no significant impact to the herd," Winland said. "We're not asking for the moon here. We're just asking for a responsible analysis of the effects of development on an entire elk herd, and a plan to allow that development to proceed in a manner that ensures the herd's health and future."

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

Bruce Pendery, Program Director with the Wyoming Outdoor Council, said he was surprised at the Augusta Unit Zeta decision.

"Given the importance of big game to people in this state, it is frustrating to see how little protection the BLM is willing to give to these species, especially the important elk herd that lives in the Fortification Creek area," Pendery said. "Natural gas could be developed without harming this herd if the BLM would only implement the right protective measures."

Licensed hunter-outfitter Pete Dube and his wife have been outfitting and guiding in the Powder River Basin since1984 for big game species. "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."

Unchecked development will surely ruin the quality of hunting, Dube argued.

"If development must occur, phased and properly planned development 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."

In their official request to the state director, the groups also argue that BLM has not demonstrated an immediate need for this action, given that producing gas wells are currently being turned off and many approved permits have yet to be drilled. The operator, Lance Oil & Gas Company, Inc., has over a thousand wells that have been permitted that are at a shut in or idle status right now.

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Copies of the request for State Director Review and photos of the Fortification Creek area are available upon request