

trib.com

Groups file protest against BLM Fortification Creek plan in Wyoming

By JEREMY FUGLEBERG

Star-Tribune energy reporter

| Posted: Wednesday, April 20, 2011 12:30 am

Eight landowner, wildlife and conservation groups filed a protest Monday with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management regarding plans to allow new coal-bed methane wells in the Fortification Creek area of the Powder River Basin.

The protest outlines what the groups consider are “Wyoming BLM’s failures to comply with the law which requires them to fully analyze and mitigate the significant impacts on Fortification’s unique resources,” according to a joint media release from the groups.

The eight groups filing the protest are Powder River Basin Resource Council, Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Wyoming Outdoor Council, Wyoming Wilderness Association, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council and The Wilderness Society.

The BLM’s proposed plan would lead to harm to the environmentally sensitive area, harm the elk herd and ruin the quality of hunting, the groups said in their protest.

The BLM released a proposed final management plan in March for the area, which spans more than 100,000 acres in Campbell, Johnson and Sheridan counties and is home to an elk herd.

The Fortification Creek area includes large areas of steep slopes and sensitive soils, and the plan requires many of those that have oil and gas leases in the area to develop proposals to protect sensitive surface resources.

It is a battleground where wildlife enthusiasts have clashed with federal land managers and gas developers since the beginning of the coal-bed methane boom in the late 1990s.

Monday was the last day for groups to file protests to the proposed plan.

Larry Gerard, a retired BLM-Wyoming wildlife biologist and Powder River Resource Council board member, said the BLM’s choices in the area have limited its options to protect it and the agency “needs to get it right.”

“On paper BLM has prioritized the protection of this area and the elk habitat for decades,” Gerard said in a media release. “Unfortunately, in one fell swoop, they have proposed to dramatically change direction and negatively impact elk habitat and other fragile resources in the area. The leases in the area contain protective stipulations but BLM has inexplicably waived these stipulations or chosen not to exercise the agency’s rights to protect the area.”

The BLM office in Wyoming said it had no comment prior to review of the protest.