

ONLINE

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The last stand?

A 12,000 acre wilderness area in Campbell County

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On Fortification Road in western Campbell County, gravel trucks kicked up white dust clouds.

A group of around 15 hikers were being trucked by the Bureau of Land Management out to a remote place called Fortification Creek, possibly one of the last wilderness areas left in the county.

But as the group pushed further into a rare prairie elk herd's yearlong range that conservation groups say should be closed to coal-bed methane development, it was hard to believe it was a true wilderness. Methane wells, oil wells and tank batteries lined the dirt road. A steady procession of 18-wheelers roared by.

As the three government trucks moved nearer the wilderness study area — a 12,000-acre area closed to drilling within the 100,000-acre Fortification Creek BLM-managed area — the country and the roads grew more rugged and cut with washes and draws. The power lines, and oil and gas wells disappeared until the group arrived on a ridge at a place that is still untouched.

Yet even that 640-acre patch of land within the wilderness study area has been leased to Yates Petroleum Corp., and there are seven plans of development proposed by energy companies to develop a total of 158 coal-bed methane wells.

Their impact could be devastating to the isolated herd of 220 elk that rely almost solely on that habitat, according to a BLM cumulative effects analysis.

"This is the only herd totally within the Powder River Basin," said Tom Bills, the BLM



Liz Howell, right, and Bernie Barlow, left, hike through the Powder River Basin's Fortification Creek on Friday morning as part of a tour of the area. The Wyoming Wilderness Association and the Bureau of Land Management sponsored the tour to educate people about wilderness areas and push for the understanding of preservation. There are nine more outings planned for this summer through pristine, roadless areas. — News-Record photo by John W. Adkisson.

environmental coordinator for Fortification Creek, who authored the study that predicted such dire effects for the elk.

“If methane goes on as it’s done everywhere else in the basin, yes,” development within Fortification Creek would harm the elk herd, he replied,

Usually, wells in the Powder River Basin are spaced at 80 acres. According to cumulative effects analysis, effective habitat would be reduced by 75 percent. Even at 640-acre spacing, 27 percent of the habitat would be lost.

Elk don’t use suitable habitats within 1.7 miles of wells and even stay about a half mile away from roads.

Energy companies interested in developing the area met with federal land managers in February. The BLM essentially turned it over to industry to come up with sustainable plans of development that would mitigate harm to the area.

Bills said the agency has yet to hear back from the companies. They seem to be waiting for the BLM to establish those practices.

“I think that’s what the companies are waiting for, and we don’t want to do that,” Bills said.

Remote monitoring of wells, reducing their footprint and removing produced water outside the elk ranges are a few of the things the BLM recommends in Fortification Creek.

But even if the footprint is reduced and wells are spaced at 160 acres — twice the normal spacing — 56 percent of the suitable habitat would be lost. Erosive soils further complicate reclaiming the land to its original state.

And the result would effectively drive the elk herd further into the interior of the management area and further into the wilderness study area, a habitat Bills’ study says cannot sustain a viable elk herd.

A study commissioned by the Powder River Basin Resource Council concurs with that assessment.

The state land within the wilderness study area may also be developed and rights-of-way can be attained to lay roads across it, further fragmenting the area.

“What makes that one so tough is that on state lands, the policy is to maximize profit,” which could mean full development of the patch, Bills said.

At the end of the hike, on the west side of the Deer Creek plan of development, a sign that orders wheeled vehicles to stay out of this part of Fortification Creek stood sentinel near a barbed wire fence.

The Wyoming Wilderness Society along with other conservation groups, have filed an appeal with the Interior Board of Land Appeals to close the federally managed portion of Fortification Creek to development.

Tom Bills’ cumulative effects study has yet to be released by the BLM and is being

reviewed by the Solicitor's Office.

"If you want to have a wilderness study area in the Powder River Basin, let's have a wilderness study area and leave it intact," said Liz Howell, executive director of WWA. "To me it's very symbolic. If we can't set aside an area like Fortification Creek, we've gone too far."

State tells schools to pay up

Campbell County and four other school districts in coal-, oil- and gas-rich regions have withheld more than \$44 million in so-called "recapture" funds, despite the passage in November of Amendment B, which required those funds to be turned over to the state, Wyoming State Superintendent Jim McBride said Monday.

Record year ... again

Campbell County officials learned late last week that they will have a little bit more money to dabble with in than was originally thought.

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39-year-old dies in one-car rollover

A 39-year-old Campbell County man died Sunday in a one-vehicle crash west of Spotted Horse that saw his pickup truck tumble almost 90 feet down an embankment after he lost control of the vehicle.

Projects push county budget close to \$200M

Campbell County commissioners are poised to give preliminary approval to a budget that may exceed \$200 million — an almost \$80 million increase over the budget year that ended Saturday.

Historic Black Hills land sells for \$2.4 million

The auction of 432 acres in the Black Hills, including the historic Cold Creek Unit, earned \$2.4 million on Friday.