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The battle for Fortification Creek

Energy needs and environmental concerns collide in the middle of nowhere

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The Ford F-150 rumbles down what's called the Kinney Divide, a road in only the loosest sense of the term, but still the main artery bisecting a valuable piece of property known as "Augusta Unit Zeta."

The pickup goes one way while a wave of trucks — which carry everything from cement to petroleum to cranes to porta-potties to miscellaneous stuff— roll the other way.

It is rush hour in the middle of nowhere.

But as traffic clammers down Kinney Divide, the driver of the F-150, Jill Morrison of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, is looking elsewhere.

"There's a drilling rig," she says, looking out into the distant desolation.

She points to the right.

"There's another," she said.

To the left.

"There's another," she said.

Then simply, "They're busy."

Yes, they're busy.

This is the Fortification Creek region that straddles Johnson and Campbell counties. Underneath the 123,000 acres of scrub and scoria, ponderosa pines, juniper trees and soaring rock hills, is what could be a windfall of methane, which produces what could be America's next great energy hope — natural gas.

There could a generation's worth of natural gas under this stark land and energy companies — led by Anadarko and Williams and with the backing of the Bureau of Land Management and other elements of the federal government — want what the land has to offer.

But there is more to the story than just the energy below the ground. There's the battle for what's above the ground too.

And that's where Morrison, the Wyoming Wildlife Federation and other environmental and conservation groups have asked for a pause.

There is wildlife everywhere — some that can be seen and most that can't. From songbirds to golden eagles and bald eagles; from wild turkeys to prairie dogs to mountain lions; to mule deer and whitetail deer and, yes, rattlesnakes, life thrives in this blasted landscape.

Most specifically, though, the battle lines are being drawn over a relatively small herd of elk, perhaps 250 to 300 in number, that use this area as their only habitat.



Earth-moving equipment in the foreground and pipe in the background are testament to the work going on at the Fortification Creek site. Two coal-bed methane companies are moving forward with plans to tap into what is believed to be a massive store of methane which would produce natural gas, a vital energy source for America.

The elk migrate throughout Fortification Creek, using it for calving and security as well as their only place to live.

It's the elk that conservation groups want to protect and nurture and they're asking the coal-bed methane companies, which are eager to get moving, to slow down.

The BLM has already said it has conducted a study and concluded the elk would not be significantly harmed by the CBM drilling. But that determination has already come under fire from conservation groups and even the BLM has decided to rewrite its Environmental Assessment plan regarding what it means to the elk.

In truth, no one really knows what the impact to wildlife will be in the vast Fortification Creek project. But two things are clear: Work has already begun to drill for the methane deep in the coal seams and two, those who oppose it aren't planning to stop anytime soon.

Indeed, the work has begun all over the region.

On a hot, dusty Friday afternoon, the Powder River Basin Resource Council based in Sheridan has sponsored a trip for local media to the southern portion of the Fortification Creek area and the elk year-long range.

Its goal is simple: To show what kind and how much development is going on and what its long-term impact might be.

Most of the tour is conducted on the 20,000-acre property owned by long-time Campbell Count rancher Billy Maycock, who has opposed drilling from the start.

Despite owning the land, he will get nothing monetarily from the energy produced and, in fact, has said some of the projects on his land have caused several of his wells to run dry.

In the past two months, the BLM has approved three new coal-bed methane projects, totaling nearly 250 wells, none of which received Maycock's approval since no approval is necessary because what's under the land is not owned by Maycock but by either the state or federal government.

In the Augusta Unit Zeta area, 134 wells have been approved with 96 more up for approval in the adjoining Carr Draw III area. All are in the elk's year-long range, which the animals require to thrive.

And some people see it as under assault.

Nowhere to go

No one really seems to know where the name "Fortification Creek" came from.

One story is that in the late 1880s a party of soldiers was marching through the when a savage early winter storm bore down. They took refuge on the creek, protected by cottonwood trees, and that became their "fortification."

Another is that with all the deep canyons and craggy draws, the area acts as a fort.

Officially now, it's known as the Fortification Creek Planning Area and of its nearly 123,000 acres, 65,000 are federally owned.

The area is now ground zero in the battle between those who want responsible drilling for the energy America needs and those who want to do whatever needs to be done to get that energy.

Mark Winland, a teacher at Campbell County High and a board member of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, said there's no reason both views can't be accommodated.

"It's not a zero sum game," he said. "You can do it right."

And while most of Fortification Creek will be opened up for CBM drilling, there is a portion that is closed to development.

The Fortification Wilderness Study is located in the northern portion of the region and encompasses some 12,000 acres. In that refuge, it's estimated between 46 and 64 elk could be supported but that's considered a very low number, especially if there aren't enough female elk.

Winland has watched the situation unfold and has studied the habits of the elk in the area.

When asked why the elk simply can't go elsewhere within the region to avoid human contact and machinery, he said it's not that simple.

"Elk are very wary," he said. "They're not used to a lot of activity."

Winland said the elk can sense anything out of the ordinary and will avoid whatever seems wrong out to a range of two miles.

And with the constant encroachment of CBM well pads, underground pipes, electrical poles, new roads, cell towers, earth-moving equipment and everything else needed for this project, the elk are already on the move.

The trouble is, Winland said, they have nowhere else to go.

"This is the last undeveloped parcel in the Powder River Basin," he said. "The elk show a great deal of affinity for this area. If they leave, they won't come back."

Changing landscape

The coal-bed methane industry knows it's under a microscope with this development, and officials have said they will do whatever is necessary to keep the area as pristine for wildlife as possible.

But facts are facts and these projects leave a mark. Each well pad is eight acres in size and contains two wells and there must be at least 80 acres between pads.

But to bring up the methane deep in the coal seams, massive amounts of water are required. As well the methane doesn't come easily and sometimes wells produce nothing but water for years before gas can be found. As a result, trenches for underground gas and water pipelines are being dug and new roads are popping up everywhere to support the increasing truck traffic.

For Morrison, who has spent 19 years working for conservation causes and battling the energy industry, each trip to Fortification Creek is an eye-opener.

"It's changed in just the last six weeks when I was out here last," she said. "The landscape has really changed. There's new pipeline, new power lines, new roads. They're just ruining this place."

Conservation groups know they face a daunting task.

Their request to the BLM to review the drilling policy has met with silence and the work of finding America's energy in Fortification Creek continues.

But their work continues. They have gotten national organizations like the Natural Resource Defense Council and the Wilderness Society to bombard state officials with e-mail requesting a slowdown and they're hoping for increased national awareness. So far, though, nothing has come from it.

The F-150 keeps rumbling across the man-made roads and Morrison keeps her eye out for signs of change she knows are there.

Asked if any energy has been produced from the wells yet, Morrison laughs wearily.

"No, just energy expended," she said. "A lot of energy expended."

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