



PRESS RELEASE

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BLM Plan Fails to Protect the Fragile Fortification Area and Prized Elk Herd Coalition Files Protest

Sheridan, April 19, 2011 - Eight landowner, wildlife and conservation groups filed an official protest yesterday with the Washington Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) objecting to a plan to allow almost 500 new coalbed methane wells in the rugged and fragile Fortification Creek Area of the Powder River Basin. The protest outlines 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, which include a prized isolated elk herd.

The 42-page protest is supported by extensive exhibits that document BLM's mistakes in their analysis. Several of those exhibits focus on the impacts to the elk herd and include expert analysis from three wildlife biologists, two of whom are retired BLM employees. Their work documents the failure of BLM's current proposal to protect the elk habitat in Fortification.

Retired BLM wildlife biologist Larry Gerard, who spent more than 30 years with the Buffalo Field office, said he believes BLM "needs to get it right."

"On paper BLM has prioritized the protection of this area and the elk habitat for decades," says Gerard. "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."

Gerard went on to describe how recent permitting actions immediately outside the planning area - but in the elk herd's yearlong range - have already decreased security habitat by 30%, and left BLM with few options for this plan. "I have been objecting to BLM's permitting within the elk herd's range for over a year now. With nearly 500 wells already out there, the remaining habitat is all that more important," continued Gerard. "BLM needs to proceed cautiously and conduct an Environmental Impact Statement that requires stronger mitigations. BLM's finding of "no significant impact" to the elk herd defies common sense and is not supported by the facts."

The BLM released the final Resource Management Plan for the Fortification Creek Planning Area in March, which allowed for only a 30-day review period and required protests to be filed by April 18th. 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 Wilderness Society.

The area under consideration is 123,000 acres located in the middle of the Powder River Basin. There are currently over 25,000 CBM wells surrounding the Fortification area, including over 400 within the elk herd's yearlong range that have been permitted within the last year and a half.

The Fortification Creek Area is known for its steep terrain, deep washes and slopes of highly erosive arid soils -- characteristics easily damaged by development and not reclaimable. According to BLM, over 80% of the planning area has severe erosion hazard potential and roughly 60% of the area has poor reclamation potential. The area also includes a 12,000 acre Wilderness Study Area and a much larger area of federal land that citizens want designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

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

Licensed hunter-outfitter Pete Dube and his wife have been outfitting and guiding for big game in the Powder River Basin since 1984. "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. Fortification is the only area left largely undeveloped."

Unchecked development will surely ruin the quality of hunting. "This is one of those areas that I believe will not recover from development impacts," Dube argues. "There are some places that are too fragile and too special to sacrifice for energy production -- and Fortification is one of them."

"If development must occur, phased and properly planned development with successful reclamation is essential to ensure some prime habitat is left available at all times," he said. "However, that's not what BLM is doing in this case."

More than 68,000 CBM well permits have been issued in the Powder River Basin over the past decade but industry has let over 34,000 of those well permits expire without drilling. "What's the rush to get into this unique and critical area when industry has so many other options?" asked Dube.

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