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Colorado Groups Move to Protect Water Supply from Coalbed Methane Drilling

Citizens push Forest Service and BLM to do their homework on permit

Paonia, CO—Three community groups filed suit in federal district court today challenging Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) decisions to allow the reworking of an old conventional gas well for coalbed methane (CBM) exploration. The citizens' groups believe that the agency did not conduct the required environmental analysis and that the well may endanger local water supplies. The well is located in the Grand Mesa National Forest, within the watershed for the town of Cedaredge.

The legal case could have implications across the West, where companies are seeking approval to redevelop conventional gas wells for coalbed methane, despite a widespread consensus that CBM has impacts that are different from conventional gas development. In the Grand Mesa region, federal lease holders are targeting entirely new geologic formations for CBM development—a process that poses significant risks to municipal water supplies and the environment.

The local community groups, Western Slope Environmental Resource Council (WSERC), Western Colorado Congress (WCC) and High Country Citizens' Alliance (HCCA), argue that the original 1981 analysis for the Leon Lake #2 gas well did not address CBM impacts and therefore is inadequate. "The federal agencies simply did not anticipate or adequately address environmental impacts typically associated with coalbed methane exploration and production," said WSERC's Jeremy Puckett. "Coalbed methane extraction is different from conventional gas recovery and can be more damaging to air and water quality. Gunnison Energy and the Forest Service are hoping to use a 22-year-old analysis to avoid having to study how this well will affect our air and water quality."

Puckett noted that Gunnison and Delta counties had declared a moratorium on CBM development until these issues could receive further study. "This decision flies in the face of the federal government's call for allowing more local control in forest management decisions," he said.

Originally approved as a conventional gas well, the Leon Lake #2 well became controversial when Gunnison Energy Corporation (GEC) proposed in August 2002 to "re-complete" it as a CBM well. GEC's plans include extending the total depth an additional 1000 feet, and fracturing entirely new, coal-bearing layers not covered by the original environmental analysis.

Coalbed methane extraction is a relatively new technology that can cause more damage than traditional gas drilling. Methane is extracted by pumping ground water out of an underground coal seam. Once the water pressure is released, naturally occurring methane can be extracted. Throughout western Colorado and into Wyoming, this process has caused serious environmental problems, usually linked to water quality. CBM wells produce as much as 16,000 gallons of

extremely saline water per day. Once limited to the San Juan Basin in southwestern Colorado, coalbed methane development proposals are popping up throughout the Western Slope – including along the base of the Grand Mesa in Delta, Gunnison and Mesa counties.

Federal law requires public comment on a draft environmental study, but the agencies arbitrarily excluded the project from environmental analysis and public input. The proposal has elicited many scientific comments citing the potential for groundwater contamination and the need for adequate studies before issuing any CBM approvals in the Grand Mesa region.

“The hydraulic fracturing can inject toxic chemicals into the coal formations and can damage groundwater supplies. The original environmental study did not consider these factors,” said Sandy Shea of HCCA. “We know coalbed methane development is coming. Before we allow the entire area to be drilled, shouldn’t our local governments and water providers at least know the potential impacts?”

“Western Colorado Congress registered its concerns about the Forest Service’s failure to plan for CBM development as early as 1993,” said Robin Nicholoff of WCC. “The GMUG National Forest is targeted for major CBM development that far exceeds any impacts ever analyzed by the Forest Service. Gunnison Energy has stated that it will be pursuing as many as 600 CBM wells on the south side of the Grand Mesa, within watersheds that affect the towns of Hotchkiss, Cedaredge, and Paonia.” The lawsuit asks the BLM and Forest Service to consider the impacts of the Leon Lake well in the context of Gunnison Energy’s larger CBM proposals.

“In this time of drought, good groundwater supplies and unpolluted surface water are more important than ever before,” Nicholoff observed. “The Forest Service should be working with communities to protect our water supply.”

The groups are represented by Brad Bartlett and Mike Chiropolos of the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies. Bartlett noted that this citizens’ suit was filed because local residents are grappling with the implications of a potential CBM boom in their backyard, while the federal agencies responsible for managing our public lands have failed to address questions about the potential impacts of CBM development to communities or to the environment.

“Federal agencies are basically pushing new, potentially hazardous gas development through under outdated environmental reviews,” Bartlett said. “We’ve built a strong case that the impacts of coalbed methane development are substantially different from those associated with conventional natural gas extraction. We’re simply trying to enforce laws passed by Congress to protect local communities and the environment from the serious impacts suffered by other CBM-producing regions.”

“BLM’s assertion that coalbed methane is no different than conventional natural gas development don’t pass the straight face test and has actually been rejected by the Department of Interior,” Chiropolos added.

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