

SHOW UP - SPEAK OUT - Protect the Fortification's Unique Resources and Wildlife

The BLM recently released a revised Draft Plan and Environmental Assessment for permitting CBM development in the prized Fortification Area. The BLM released a similar plan two years ago but industry succeeded in derailing plan because they did not agree with phased development restrictions. The new Fortification CBM development plan needs to be stronger to ensure protection of the elk herd and protect this fragile and unique area. The BLM will be holding public meetings to discuss their plan and take comments at the following times and locations:

Tuesday, October 19th – Gillette, Campbell County Public Library – 2101 South 4J Road
Wednesday, October 20th – Buffalo, Johnson County Fire Hall – 314 Railroad Avenue
Thursday, October 21st – Sheridan, Fulmer Public Library, 335 West Alger

BLM will be giving presentations on the draft plan at 3:30, 5:00, and 6:30 p.m. They take public comments at these meetings and accept written comments through Nov. 16, 2010. Comments can be emailed to Fort_Crk_WYMail@blm.gov. Copies of the Draft RMPA/EA are available online at www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/info/NEPA/bfodocs/fortification_creek.html, at the Buffalo Field Office, and local libraries. More information about the Fortification Creek Area is available on our website: <http://www.powderriverbasin.org/fortification-creek/>

BACKGROUND: The Fortification area is more than 100,000 acres of public BLM land interwoven with private holdings located between Buffalo and Gillette. It contains a 12,000 acre Wilderness Study Area and is a state treasure renowned for its unique Powder River breaks topography, wildlife, trophy game and bird hunting as well as scenic beauty. It is rich in cultural and historic resources with over 180 historic and prehistoric sites documented in the area.

Fortification provides critical winter range and calving grounds for an isolated prairie elk herd. It is an ecological stronghold for many species in the Powder River Basin. Rich biological diversity abounds with mule deer, antelope, whitetail, grouse, small mammals, over 200 species of migratory birds, turkey, bobcats, and mountain lion inhabiting the area.

The breaks topography includes fragile, erosive soils and steep slopes which are potentially impossible to reclaim or restore from oil and gas development disturbances. Juniper and pine fill draw bottoms and sagebrush and grasses cover the ridges and hills. Fertile bottomlands and many springs for wildlife and cattle make this a keystone area for many populations and an important grazing resource for ranchers.

IMPORTANT POINTS:

The Fortification Elk herd is significant and valued: BLM is justifying a FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT by stating that “elk are a common species and that the viability of small Wyoming elk herd (the Fortification herd) is insignificant within the national and regional contexts.” BLM is essentially saying that it doesn't matter if the elk herd disappears because of the gas development. Tell BLM that this area is irreplaceable and unique, the elk herd is locally significant and the alternatives as proposed are wholly inadequate to protect this area, the habitat and the wildlife. The BLM must either do a full blown Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or reduce the impacts.

BLM's recent permitting in the southern Fortification elk yearlong range is having significant impacts: BLM needs to heed the lessons of past permitting. Over the past year and a half, BLM has permitted over 400 CBM wells in the elk herd's yearlong range. The impacts from these CBM projects are astounding. According to BLM, over 1/3 of the elk herd's habitat has already been impacted and the herd's population has declined from 230 elk to 180 elk. BLM should not permit more wells until already disturbed habitat in the southern elk yearlong range is reclaimed.

BLM needs to have a strong meaningful plan and alternative for phased development tied to reclamation standards and habitat and backed by site specific reclamation bonding. BLM needs to have goals for reclamation of CBM development before new development is approved. Permitting must go slow, allowing the elk herd and the fragile area time to adapt and recover from extensive development. Site specific bonding must be required in order to ensure industry will reclaim the area.

BLM needs to value the important resources of the area. The Fortification Creek Area has tremendous wildlife resources, clean air and water, fragile vegetation and soils and undisturbed lands. The public has identified these resources as important since the early 1970s. They are equally important – if not more so – than natural gas in the area. BLM must protect all resources during development and ensure that the area can continue to be used for hunting, recreation and ranching. The EA notes at page 4-48 in the EA, “CBNG development in the Fortification Creek Planning Area (FCPA) will result in an increase in noxious weeds in areas of surface disturbance (potentially 3,536 acres), which could spread to areas outside the FCPA.”

BLM needs to uphold their lease stipulations for protecting the areas resources and look at options such as letting CBM leases expire, buying back leases or otherwise protecting large areas of elk habitat. The leases issued to industry in this area come with strict lease stipulations and restrictions that require surface occupancy or use for miner development will be restricted or prohibited unless the operator and surface managing agency arrive at an acceptable plan for mitigation of anticipated impacts. BLM has chosen alternatives that fail to mitigate the impacts and “provide modest changes to existing management.” According to BLM's own lease requirements they need to do more than “modest changes” to protect the important resources of the area. Tell BLM not to cave to industry pressure to develop one of the last best places in the Powder River Basin.

