

San Juan Citizens Alliance

Organizing for the people and land of the San Juan Basin

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Citizens Reject Drilling in HD Mountains *Challenge Forest Service, Industry to Follow the Law*

Durango, Colorado -- Local residents rejected plans announced today for drilling hundreds of new gas wells in the HD Mountains in southwest Colorado. The San Juan National Forest in Durango released a long-awaited environmental impact statement analyzing impacts from drilling the wells, and proposed approval for over 100 coalbed methane wells just in the HD Mountains Roadless Area alone. An industry consortium led by BP Amoco has requested authorization for as many as 297 gas wells near Durango and Bayfield.

"The HD Mountains are the last tiny, little corner of the San Juan Basin not yet drilled for natural gas development," said Janine Fitzgerald, President of San Juan Citizens Alliance and an adjacent landowner to the HDs. "As the HDs go, so goes the rest of the West. Are we going to sacrifice all of our public lands to natural gas drilling, or save a few special places for future generations? Should America's public lands be managed for the benefit of local residents or for the profits of foreign oil companies?" Primary drilling proponent BP Amoco is headquartered in London, England. BP Amoco reported \$12.4 billion in profits last year.

Residents oppose drilling that threatens not only the majestic stands of old-growth ponderosa pine and abundant herds of wildlife, but also the very health and safety of their homes and families. The Forest Service's preferred alternative waives a long-standing health and safety regulation that bans drilling along the outcrop of the coal-bearing Fruitland Formation that holds the coalbed methane.

Bill Vance raises hay and grain on 80 of his 400 acres that are surrounded by the HD Mountains. The Forest Service plans to approve wells drilled literally at his doorstep, with 8 wells located next to his farm on three sides. "My biggest concern is that a drop in the water table will cause my domestic water wells to dry up," says Vance, "as well as the springs that supply water for irrigation and livestock." Coalbed methane drilling entails pumping massive amounts of groundwater out of coal seams to release the methane gas, a process that often dramatically alters groundwater aquifers, particularly near the outcrop of the coal seam.

Drilling elsewhere along the outcrop resulted in hazardous levels of methane gas in numerous homes along the Pine River valley north of Bayfield in the early 1990s that resulted in demolition of at least four homes. Drilling near the outcrop has been fingered as the culprit for other hazards around La Plata County, including underground coal fires, methane seeps that killed large swaths of vegetation, and hydrogen sulfide seeps so dangerous that federal fire-fighters are restricted from entering suspect zones.

Industry plans for drilling the HD Mountains, as approved by the Forest Service, will lace the currently roadless mountains with at least 60 miles of new roads cut into some of the steepest and most rugged terrain in the San Juan Mountains. The roads and gas pads will also obliterate 80 percent of the old-growth ponderosa pine forests in the HD Mountains, many over 300 years old. Ponderosa pine has the least remaining old-growth of any forest type in the San Juans, less than 5% of the pre-European settlement figures.

Ancient pre-Puebloan Indians inhabited much of the HD Mountains, and for that reason much of the area is included in a nationally-designated historic district. "The HD Mountains provide a unique research opportunity to investigate how pre-Puebloan people responded to environmental variables," notes Dr. Jim Judge, professor emeritus of archeology at Fort Lewis College. "We know that people moved into the HD Mountains with a population that peaked in 900 A.D., then moved out around 1000 A.D. We just don't know why they moved in and out in a one-time situation. It seems to be clearly in response to environmental pressures. But if the HD Mountains are destroyed by gas development, society will forever lose the answers to these questions."

Most recreational use of the HDs occurs during hunting season. "The HD Mountains are a main migration corridor for elk and deer, one of the few that remain intact," says Mike Murphy, a hunting outfitter for the past 25 years. "Drilling will disrupt the migration and scatter the herds." Murphy packs hunters into the HDs on horseback, sets up camp, and guides the hunt. He fears his business will suffer when the drilling starts.

Gene Merrill has extensively explored the HDs on horseback and regular leads tours with local backcountry horsemen. "The HDs offer a fantastic horseback riding experience," says Gene. "They offer close proximity to local populations, diverse terrain and quiet, serene areas without roads, wells, and the insane noise of gas production that has gobbled up most of the low-lying public riding areas."

The diverse alliance opposing the Forest Service's decision to drill the HD Mountains suggests applying emerging new technologies to explore for gas under the area. They point to horizontal drilling technology that has increasingly been used by a few gas companies operating in the San Juan Basin. This technology allows multiple wells to be drilled from a single well pad, and reach out horizontally up to a mile or farther horizontally. Much of the gas under the HD Mountains could be accessed today utilizing this technology, and advances likely in the next few years could further reduce the need for devastating road cuts and gas pads on the area's steep ridges and hillsides. The most touted technology belongs to CDX Gas, which has drilled several wells near the HDs that reach several thousand feet horizontally and produce 1-2 million cubic feet per day of gas, which ranks them as extremely productive wells.

The Forest Service's proposal to adopt industry's plans for hundreds of gas wells left many local residents saddened. "I'm heartsick that the Forest Service betrayed the wildlife, trees, and watershed it is supposed to protect and instead chose the industry's bulldoze and drill alternative," said Jim Fitzgerald who farms on 320 acres adjacent to the HD Mountains. "The recommendation also betrays the people who love the HD Mountains. By caving in to the oil and gas industry, the Forest Service will ignite months or years of strife and conflict in southwest Colorado."

The HD Mountains Coalition plans to scrutinize the Forest Service's planned drilling with technical experts in a range of fields including air quality, archeology, forestry, wildlife, and hydrology. They also plan to work with area landowners, recreational users, local governments, and many others concerned about the reckless proposal to flood the Forest Service with comments expressing concern.

Photos, maps, short film clips, and more information are available from www.savehdmountains.org.

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