

Coalition Appeals HD Mountains Drilling

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Durango, Colorado – Local elected officials, farmers, hunters and other area residents concerned about plans for drilling gas wells around the HDs Mountains filed an appeal yesterday challenging the Forest Service’s decision that approved dozens of new coalbed methane wells. The collection of appellants includes the Archuleta County Commissioners, a hunting outfitter, a farmer who relies on the HD Mountains for irrigation and domestic water, and an archeologist as well as a several local, state and national conservation organizations.

A major concern of area residents is the impact of drilling gas wells along the edge of the HD Mountains, where the coal seam comes to the surface at the Fruitland formation outcrop. Drilling along the outcrop in La Plata County led to hazardous levels of methane gas in numerous homes along the Pine River valley north of Bayfield in the early 1990s, and 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.

Because of these problems, the Forest Service continued to ban drilling within 1.5-miles of the outcrop in La Plata County, but approved similar drilling along the outcrop in Archuleta County despite concerns about health and safety. “We are concerned that the Forest Service’s decision will not protect the health, safety and welfare of Archuleta County residents from potentially adverse impacts of gas development near the Fruitland outcrop,” said Archuleta County Commission chairman Bob Moomaw in explanation of the county’s decision to join the appeal.

Bill Vance raises hay and grain on 80 of his 360 acres that are surrounded by the HD Mountains. "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.

Industry plans for drilling the HD Mountains, as approved by the Forest Service, will punch at least 8 miles of new roads and up to 30 gas wells cut into some of the steepest and most rugged terrain in the San Juan Mountains. The roads and gas pads will also obliterate some of the last stands of old-growth ponderosa pine forests in the HD Mountains, including some over 400 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.

The groups are represented by Earthjustice, a public interest environmental law firm, and appealed the Forest Service's April 5 Record of Decision to the Rocky Mountain Regional Forester in Denver. The appeal asserts that the Forest Service violated management standards in its forest plan that protect watersheds, wildlife, and old-growth; that the decision harms air quality in the region, violating levels set by the EPA to protect the public and nearby Mesa Verde National Park and the Weminuche Wilderness; and that the Forest Service failed to abide by the National Environmental Policy Act in proving that mitigation measures were feasible and realistic. The Forest Service has 45 days to respond to the appeal.

The list of appellants includes Archuleta County Board of Commissioners, Bill Vance, Dr. Jim Judge, Mike Murphy, San Juan Citizens Alliance, Oil and Gas Accountability Project, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Wild and The Wilderness Society.

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

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