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Citizens Still Concerned about Drilling in HD Mountains

Durango, Colorado -- Local residents reacted cautiously to the Forest Service's Record of Decision for over 100 coalbed methane wells in the Northern San Juan Basin around 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, an adjacent landowner to the HDs. "As goes the HDs, so goes the West. The HD Mountains pose significant challenges to drilling because of the area's steep topography, the prospect of methane contamination, and the impact to springs and seeps."

Residents have opposed drilling plans that threaten not only the HD Mountains' 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 decision reverses a long-standing health and safety regulation that bans drilling along the outcrop of the coal-bearing Fruitland Formation that holds the coalbed methane, but lays out a set of conditions in advance of approving wells here.

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 along the outcrop in La Plata County 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. The Forest Service's decision authorizes drilling along the outcrop in the Archuleta County portion of the HD Mountains.

"While we appreciate the safeguards the Forest Service is attempting to impose before drilling the outcrop, we are still dubious about gambling with the homes and livelihoods of landowners along the outcrop," said Janine Fitzgerald, who lives along the HD Mountains. The Forest Service has included extensive measures for monitoring water wells, methane seeps, and establishing emergency responses measures before drilling on the outcrop, in response to concerns raised local governments and landowners. Concerned residents will carefully scrutinize the agency's proposed requirements to determine if they offer adequate safeguards for farmers, ranchers, and landowners.

Residents applauded the Forest Service's decision to comply with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which was reinstated by a federal court ruling last fall. The decision will prevent drilling on leases in the roadless area immediately behind Bill Vance's ranch in the HD Mountains.

Conservationists also praised the Forest Service's decision to prohibit drilling in Ignacio Canyon in the heart of the HD Mountains. "Ignacio Creek's watershed is one of the wildest spots on the San Juan National Forest," said Mark Pearson, executive director of San Juan Citizens Alliance. "I've rarely experienced any place more remote than Ignacio Creek. The Forest Service's decision safeguards some of the last, best stands of ancient ponderosa pines in the entire San Juan Mountains."

However, they continue to express concern about additional wells that could be drilled on steep slopes and ridges in the roadless area, on old leases that date back to the 1970s or 1980s. The Forest Service's preferred alternative still proposes to authorize roads along the spine of the HD Mountains, in ancient stands of massive ponderosa pines.

The diverse alliance opposing industry's plans maintains there is no urgency to drill the HD Mountains. Industry already has approvals to drill thousands of additional wells across the San Juan Basin. Opponents to drilling suggest waiting until advanced drilling technology matures, which could reduce the need for devastating road cuts and gas pads on the area's steep ridges and hillsides.

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

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