

PXP DEIS elicits strong responses

Story and photo by Kaitlyn McAvoy

On Dec. 9, the much-anticipated Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for a proposed 136-well drilling project in the Wyoming Range on Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF) was released.

The Eagle Prospect and Noble Basin Master Development Plan (MDP) was put forward by Plains Exploration and Production Company (PXP) earlier this year, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) first expected the DEIS to be completed by August, then October, then November. The project includes two phases, the first of which is drilling three exploratory wells, each to a depth of about 12,500 feet, on one well pad.

Under phase two of the proposed project, an additional 133 wells would be drilled on 16 new wells pads on an area of over 22 square miles. Drilling would occur over a span of 12 years, though the wells could produce for up to 30 years.

Approximately 328 acres of land will be disturbed as a result of the project due to new roads, well pads, gathering lines for gas and produced liquids and other facilities associated with the project, according to the DEIS. All access to the potential field would be from Merna Road.

Within a day after the release of the DEIS, environmental groups, outfitter associations and hunters issued statements in opposition to the PXP project.

Citizens for the Wyoming Range is calling it a "Jonah Field in the woods." They say it includes an "unacceptable" amount of new road construction, surface disruption and full-scale industrialization in an inappropriate area. The project would have significant impacts on wildlife, minimize backcountry recreation and hunting and be impossible to mitigate, according to a statement released Dec. 10 from Citizens for the Wyoming Range.

"It's not wise use, and it's not going to happen without a growing number of concerned citizens putting up a fight," it states.

Citizens for the Wyoming Range, which is made up of local residents, backcountry users and hunters, stated it was deeply disappointed in the DEIS findings, saying PXP's original proposal has been largely unchanged. Five alterna-

They include a no-action alternative and an option whereby PXP would retire its oil and gas leases within the Wyoming Range.

Citizens for the Wyoming Range said the retirement or buyout of PXP's mineral leases is the only acceptable option.

"The only solution that makes sense for this area is a lease buyout," the coalition's statement said.

Citizens United for Responsible Energy Development (CURED) is another local group calling for a buyout of PXP's leases on BTNF. The development would be impossible to mitigate and completely change the character of the Noble Basin, the group said in a statement released Dec. 20.

"The drilling footprint left in the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline is not what we want to see in our forests," CURED statement said.

PXP also owns leases in the Hoback Ranches community, where nearly 100 people live or own land inside the MDP project area. Drilling in the Hoback Ranches is not included in PXP's MDP, but the community is located just east of where the company does plan to drill.

Heather Matthews owns land in the Hoback Ranches. She and her husband currently live near the Hoback Junction but purchased property in the Hoback Ranches in 2005, two weeks before they heard about PXP's original plan to drill exploratory wells in the Noble Basin.

"Our reaction is, we have to fight this," she said.

She was shocked to find there could be drilling close to where she and her husband had planned to build a home and retire. Matthews' idea of where drilling occurred in Wyoming was flat, sagebrush covered land, not the mountainous and grassy BTNF where an abundance of wildlife inhabit.

"We absolutely love that area," Matthews said. "It will be sad to see a good chunk of it destroyed."

Matthews is a participant in the group Stop Drilling, Save the Bridger-Teton National Forest. All of PXP's leases in the BTNF should be retired, she said, adding not only she and the rest of Wyoming would be eternally grateful, but also anyone who appreciates the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

said of PXP.

Three of the alternatives to the project outlined in the DEIS allow development. "Alternative B" allows PXP to develop the area as it has proposed. "Alternative C" is the USFS-preferred action and allows development but requires additional air-quality control measures, a 500-foot no-surface-occupancy buffer around wildlife habitats and a 200-foot buffer around stream channels.

"Alternative D" requires helicopter use to transport drilling equipment and supplies that would normally be transported by semi-trucks. The existing roads would be made suitable for the use of pickups, but not for larger vehicles hauling drilling rigs and other heavy equipment.

Some say there is fundamental information missing from the DEIS, however. Tom Curry, a Pinedale resident and retired natural resource specialist with the Bureau of Land Management said he would like to see some baseline air quality studies conducted in the Noble Basin before any development occurs. That way, if and when PXP drills in the area, air quality can be compared to what it was before development began.

He also thinks the USFS also needs to consider a different access road to the potential gas field other than the one proposed through Merna. Residents live along the access road and would have to deal with daily truck traffic, and they can't be happy about that, said Curry.

"I would be irate about it," he said.

Stephanie Kessler, Wyoming program coordinator for the Wilderness Society, agrees there is a lot of room for improvement in the DEIS and hopes to continue to work with the USFS.

"We certainly think that they can be better," she said.

In Sublette County, two public meetings have been scheduled to discuss PXP's project and the DEIS. On Jan 19, a meeting will be held in Bondurant and the following day in Pinedale.

The USFS is accepting public comments through March 10, 2011. PXP could not be reached for comment. ■