

PXP offers to retire some leases in BTNF

Story and photo by Kaitlyn McAvoy

Houston-based Plains Exploration and Production Company (PXP) currently holds approximately 53,000 acres of federal mineral leases on the Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF), and earlier this month, the company made an agreement with the Wyoming Outfitters & Guides Association (WYOGA) and Wyoming Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (WYSFW), saying PXP would retire 28,240 acres of those leases.

If adopted, the agreement would protect the land from future oil and gas development. However, these nearly 30,000 acres of leases PXP is proposing to retire are located west and north of the Hoback River and not located within PXP's Eagle Prospect and Noble Basin Master Development Plan project area, where the company is proposing to drill 136 gas wells.

"Everyone needs to be clear that's not in the project site," said Stephanie Kessler, Wyoming program manager for the Wilderness Society.

The agreement would also include PXP committing \$6 million to a fund that would be used to offset project impacts, including air and water quality monitoring. The majority of the money, \$4 million, would be earmarked to a fish and wildlife habitat fund. The area where PXP is proposing to retire its leases is summer habitat for elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep, moose and antelope.

Gary Amerine, vice president of WYOGA, said the agreement is a balance between new energy development and conservation.

"In the end, we put together what we believe is a model for how the oil and gas industry and the sportsmen community can and should work together in sensitive areas," Amerine stated in a press release.

Though not every sportsman agrees with

him, Rodney Rasmusson has been hunting in the Wyoming Range his whole life. He lives in Rock Springs, has family in Sublette County and returns to the Hoback annually to hunt. This year Rasmusson, 40, shot his first moose in the area.

He is not in favor of the agreement between PXP and the outfitters and sportsmen groups.

"I didn't agree with it, and I don't know anybody that does," said Rasmusson.

He said he is not against oil and gas development. In fact, his job is building oil and gas compressors, and he realizes he could be taking a risk speaking in opposition to an oil and gas project. But, Rasmusson said there are places where energy development just shouldn't occur.

"They need to stay out of my backyard as much as they can; that's my hunting area," he said.

The Noble Basin is part of his heritage, and Rasmusson said it's being taken away from him.

"And my government is letting them," he said.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal was initially concerned about PXP's project, but he has called the agreement a "good first step" towards progress between interest groups and the energy company. In a statement released Dec. 15, Freudenthal stated he hoped the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) looked closely at the agreement, as his office would be.

"I appreciate that a couple years ago when I expressed my concerns with their plans for exploratory drilling, PXP went back and took a more detailed look," he said. "Given the location of this project, great care needs to be taken to ensure that while PXP is exercising its rights to develop the leases, the environment of the Wyoming Range is protected."

Gov. Freudenthal will take a letter expressing citizen concerns to the USFS following a meeting with several legislative representatives last week. Wyoming Representative Jim Roscoe, who attended the meeting, said Sublette County already has two examples of development in the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline and now "has a chance to do better at that development."

Roscoe also stressed the importance of ensuring studies are done before development begins so it is possible to determine if pollution or some other problem arises.

Bob Wharff, Wyoming State Director for WYSFW, one of the groups included in the agreement, stated in the release about the agreement that PXP has a legal right to drill on their leases, and the fact the company is willing to retire some of those rights is "fairly remarkable."

No one can argue PXP has the right to drill on its leases, Kessler said, but people in Sublette County realize this agreement won't mitigate the impacts of the proposed project.

"Off-site mitigation and throwing money at something is not the same at modifying and limiting mitigation on site," Kessler said.

She takes issue with how the discussions were held between those involved in creating the agreement — "behind closed doors," Kessler said. The USFS is accepting comments from the public on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and PXP's project through March 20, 2011.

Kessler said this agreement between WYOGA, WYSFW and PXP is exactly that.

"To us, we see it as just another comment to the Forest Service, and that's how it should be weighted because it was a very limited process," she said.

Dan Smitherman is a main spokesperson

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for Citizens for the Wyoming Range. He lives in Bondurant and has spent years guiding trips through the mountains where PXP plans to drill. While he thinks the agreement between the outfitters and sportsmen groups and PXP is a start, he said, in a perfect world, PXP would retire all its leases including those in the Noble Basin.

Smitherman questions the value of the agreement — PXP has made no public plans to drill in the area of the leases they are proposing to retire, and the mitigation efforts PXP laid out in the agreement are things the USFS would require of the company regardless.

Like Kessler, Smitherman said the agreement shouldn't be thought of more than a suggestion to the USFS during the public comment period of the process.

"The agreement, it carries no more weight than any viable comment from an organization or citizen," he said. ■

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