

Boom prompts look at ‘Jonah in the Woods’

Conservationists offer view of potential development near Bondurant, Hoback Rim.

By Cory Hatch

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With a “Jonah in the Woods” possible on 22,000 acres near Hoback Ranches, conservation groups are taking a hard look at the implications of wide-scale gas development on what some consider pristine national forest lands.

Late last month, the Plains Exploration and Production Company asked the Forest Service to stop work in an environmental study to approve three wells so the company can conduct a more expansive review of drilling in the area. The company would have drilled exploratory gas wells on a 4.5-acre site within two miles of the Hoback Ranches subdivision, building a new a four-mile road and working year-round.

Though Plains Exploration hasn’t specified what that expansive review would entail, conservation groups have decided to show what a developed gas field, like the Jonah Field in the sagebrush plain farther south, would look like in the mountains.

The organization, SkyTruth, simulated a full-field development on satellite images and topographic maps across the 22,000 acres leased for development. SkyTruth president John Amos added well pads and a network of roads to maps and images of the Bridger-Teton National Forest and adjacent private property that Plains Exploration holds under lease.

The result is a spiderweb of roads and drilling pads that envelopes the hills around the upper Hoback River.

“We need to be doing a lot better job of visualizing for people what the future landscapes around them could look like,” said Amos from his office in Shepherdstown, W.VA. “They [the Forest Service] should be creating visual representations like this for the public to look at and talk about. To not provide an actual picture of that in this day and age when the technology is there to do that seems negligent.”

The chance of a Jonah clone

Amos acknowledges that the density and location of roads and well pads on his maps are just a guess. But he maintains that the representation is a good guess. Plains Exploration officials have told shareholders that the Hoback Rim has the potential to become another Jonah Field.

“They are convinced and they are convincing investors that they have a Jonah-sized prospect that they’re homing in on,” Amos said. “We looked and said ‘Hey, what would a Jonah Field in the woods look like?’”

Using imagery of existing oil and gas fields, the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline in particular, Amos imitated development of a well every 40-acres.

“We think that’s a pretty reasonable and conservative estimate considering that Jonah has gone way beyond that,” Amos said.

Energy companies have increased well density on some sites over time. Jonah and the Anticline are both examples of such. They were approved at one density and developed further through federally approved “infill” plans.

“It makes more economic sense to go after marginally economic pockets of oil and gas in the area once you get the roads, the power lines and the pipe lines in,” Amos said.

For such infill projects, public interest and resistance to more energy development can decline. A few hundred more wells likely won’t further affect hunting or other recreation opportunities if most recreation enthusiasts have moved on.

Still, Amos acknowledges that his best guess could be different than an energy company proposal. Most well pads on the Jonah Field range from 3.5 to four acres, about the size of a Wal-Mart building and parking lot. On the anticline, companies are drilling directionally, placing several wells on a single pad. As many as 20 wells can be drilled from one pad. The technique helps prevent disturbance elsewhere.

“If they drilled everything like that, it might have less impact on the habitat and ecosystem,” said Amos. “It means fewer roads and less intense fragmentation of the landscape. It seems to make sense. There really needs to be some research done on that question.”

Peter Aengst, deputy director of the Bozeman Wilderness Society, said he applauds the use of visual aids to call attention to the effects of oil and gas drilling.

“A picture is worth a thousand words when it comes to an oil and gas proposal,” he said. “It’s really only fair to the public that could be impacted, including hunters and recreationists, that we make clear what that [a given plan for energy development] means.”

While Aengst says the SkyTruth pictures may only represent a guess at the project’s scope, it’s approximation of future development is more valid than the original environmental impact statement.

“The way the Forest Service represented it, with just the one pad and three wells coming off it, that wasn’t reality either,” he said. “Part of the message that these images convey is that this is not the place for major industrial scale oil and gas development.

“Responsible energy development means that some places are too special to drill,” Aengst said. “This is one of those places.”

Aengst and others are pushing Congress to pass a law that will forbid future oil and gas drilling in the Wyoming Range and allow conservation groups to buy back existing leases from energy companies.

“I really think the answer is not going to be found in the EIS process,” he said. “The answer is going to be found in legislation.”

Plains Exploration and Production Company spokesman Steve Rusch said that neither his company nor the Forest Service has decided what would be included in the expanded environmental impact statement.

“The Forest Service is still looking at what that might entail based on the comments they’ve received,” he said. The agency received about 19,000 comments, almost all of which were opposed to drilling.

“Our position had been that we needed to drill these [three original] wells in order to look at if there is any gas,” Rusch said. “The public had an interest in looking at more than that ... we’re stepping back.”

Treading new ground

Rusch said that his company is taking an unprecedented step by evaluating the environmental impacts of full-field production before they’re even sure if drilling for gas is a viable option in the area.

“We felt that it would be wise to pause the EIS process,” and incorporate that full-field development in the analysis “in some form or fashion,” he said.

In his letter to the Forest Service, Rusch mentioned that the public had certain “misconceptions” about the original project. He declined to elaborate. He would not comment on several wildlife issues that conservation groups say were not addressed in the original environmental impact statement.

Rusch did call air quality a “serious issue” that he asked the Forest Service to address during the analysis.

“We’re trying to formulate reasonable, foreseeable production scenarios based on what we do or don’t know today and subject that to a [National Environmental Policy Act] analysis,” Rusch said.

Though the Forest Service has yet to comment on the scope of the new proposal, Rusch said his company plans to follow through with the original plan for the exploratory wells.

“We’re going to have to do the three wells regardless,” he said. “The first thing we’re going to do is what has already been described and what has already been reviewed. The first three wells we’re going to drill will be in section 8, as already described.”

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Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Today

Panoramic view looking west over the "Eagle Prospect" as it appears on recent Landsat satellite imagery.



Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Tomorrow?

Panoramic view looking west over the "Eagle Prospect" showing how the area could look if it is developed for natural gas in a manner similar to the nearby Jonah and Pinedale Anticline gas fields. This conservative simulation shows only 16 drilling locations ("well pads") per square mile, a spacing of one well every 40 acres. Both Jonah and Pinedale, originally slated for 80-acre spacing, were rapidly drilled at 40-acre spacing, and are now approved for drilling at a much higher density (10-acre spacing in places, 64 wells per square mile). The well pads appear as bright spots about 3.5 acres in size, connected by a pervasive network of access roads and pipelines. Highway 189/191 (heavy dark line) is emphasized for reference.



Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Today

Landsat satellite image showing the area of the Eagle natural-gas prospect in the northern Wyoming Range, Bridger-Teton National Forest. Image was taken on August 31, 2005.



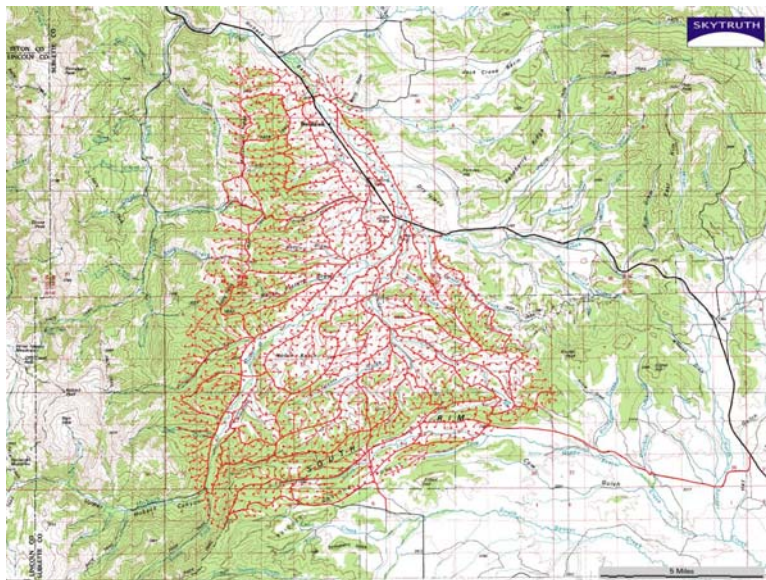
Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Tomorrow?

Landsat satellite image showing the area of the Eagle natural-gas prospect in the northern Wyoming Range, Bridger-Teton National Forest. Simulation shows how the area could look if it is developed for natural gas in a manner similar to the nearby Jonah and Pinedale Anticline gas fields. This conservative simulation shows only 16 drilling locations ("well pads") per square mile, a spacing of one well every 40 acres. Both Jonah and Pinedale, originally slated for 80-acre spacing, were rapidly drilled at 40-acre spacing, and are now approved for drilling at a much higher density (10-acre spacing in places, 64 wells per square mile). The well pads appear as bright spots about 3.5 acres in size, connected by a pervasive network of access roads and pipelines. Highway 189/191 (heavy dark line) is emphasized for reference.



Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Reference Map

USGS topographic base map showing the area of the Eagle Prospect.



Eagle Prospect, Wyoming Range - Drilling Simulation

USGS topographic base map showing the area of the Eagle Prospect. Simulated network of well pads and access roads is shown in red, assuming 40-acre spacing for drilling locations (16 wellpads per square mile).

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