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Large gas development edges forward in western Wyoming
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A huge gas project in western Wyoming drew closer to federal approval Thursday with the release of a final federal environmental analysis; a decision is likely within a month.

The Bureau of Land Management is considering the Normally Pressured Lance natural gas project from Jonah Energy. The firm proposed 3,500 new wells drilled over a ten-year period in the Green River Basin about 30 miles south of Pinedale. The NPL project would generate more than 900 jobs during development and about \$1.1 billion in royalty revenue for Wyoming, according to the federal estimates.

The project area is a 140,859 acre patch of land with just 55 wells on it currently, but lies adjacent to Wyoming's most well known gas fields — Jonah and Pinedale.

The project is one of a few large-scale approaches to development in Wyoming that are being reviewed by the Bureau of Land Management. A Converse County oil and gas project is currently in its draft environmental review period. That would bring 5,000 wells to the Powder River Basin.

In a statement Thursday, Gov. Matt Mead said the conclusion of three large scale environmental analyses in the state was part of his energy strategy.

"Thank you to Secretary Zinke for his help on this project for Wyoming," the governor said, referencing Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

The Bureau of Land Management released the final environmental impact statement Thursday, which will have a 30-day shelf life until the final decision. Federal officials looked at a number of alternative ways to develop the project, including the proposal brought by industry.

Its preferred route, and the likely one in the final decision next month, would extend the lifetime of the project to reduce the rate of activity, but include the same number of wells. It would include 205 miles of new pipeline and roads — which are constructed along the same routes — 39 miles of new powerlines and risks to surface water from potential spills.

Industry's proposal would withdraw 474 acre-feet of groundwater annually during development, and about 18 acre-feet per year during production years, from the upper Wasatch aquifer. The BLM's counter to that proposal would decrease development withdrawals by .1 percent, but decrease ongoing production withdrawals by nearly 10 percent.

Under the Bureau of Land management's alternative, the project would leave long-term disturbance on just over 1 percent of the total project area, or about 1,741 acres of land, from roads to equipment yards.

The small footprint is partly due to advances in horizontal drilling and the practice of placing up to 64 wells on single multi-well pads. The pads themselves are massive, covering up to 18 acres, but reduce the overall impact of the project.

Of the many effects of the development listed in the final Environmental Impact Statement, sage grouse is one that has instigated a number of concerns. The project encompasses the only winter concentration area known for the Wyoming bird. Sage grouse in large numbers flock to the area during the winter months. Given how little development exists in the area now, the project would significantly increase issues like noise disturbance, truck traffic and reduced habitat.

Those opposed to the development say it is unclear how NPL will affect those numbers.

The preferred alternative from federal managers allows a few ways to deal with the bird, limits to overall development in the winter range, seasonal restrictions and a study to give officials more data on how development affects winter ranges for the bird.

Sage grouse are a contentious issue lately, as the Bureau of Land Management's conservation plans for the bird are in the midst of a rewrite that some argue will damage the species and invite another endangered species listing. A listing is a significant risk to Wyoming oil and gas which would be fettered by such a status, given the bird's broad range in the state.

Michael Saul, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the NPL project could be the "beginning of the end" for the bird, given the greater context.

"In addition to greenlighting drilling in critical winter habitat, Trump officials have indiscriminately leased nearly 2 million acres of sage grouse habitat for fossil fuel development," he said. "They're also undermining landmark sage grouse conservation plans. This spells serious trouble not just for sage grouse but for hundreds of other animals that depend on sagebrush country."

The group is one of the most vocal in its criticism of the handling of sage grouse by federal and state officials, but it is not alone in its fears for the bird. Still, industry and many public officials argue that the changes to sage grouse management will not have a negative impact on conservation long term.

The project would also overlap with the Path of the Pronghorn, one the longest migration corridors in the U.S. Pronghorn, like Wyoming mule deer, have been documented as avoiding oil and gas wells.

BLM Deputy Director Brian Steed said the NPL project is important for both Wyoming and rest of the country.

“It will provide valuable natural gas to power the country, significant royalty revenue to the state and Treasury, and the type of jobs that support western communities,” he said.

Jonah, which took over the NPL project from Encana in 2014, voluntarily stalled the project in 2015 to develop strategies that reduce impacts on wildlife, including the wintering sage grouse and the mule deer.

A spokesman for the company Friday said it was reviewing the details of the final environmental impact statement and noted its record of working on conservation issues.

“As part of our plans for the project adjacent to the Jonah Field in Wyoming, Jonah Energy will readily continue to partner with the state, BLM, and various community and environmental organizations to ensure that the NPL project sets the standard for environmental protection and sustainable oil and gas drilling,” said Paul Ulrich, the company’s director of government and regulatory affairs, in a statement.

Ulrich is a member of Wyoming’s sage grouse management team, a consortium of industry, conservation and government officials that built, and now maintains, Wyoming’s sage grouse management plans.

The total lifetime of NPL project, according to the federal analysis, is about 40 years, during which some 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas could be produced. Including the \$1 billion in state mineral royalties, the project could generate nearly \$18 billion in total revenue.