



OIL AND GAS: BLM advancing massive Utah project with mandates to protect air quality

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The Obama administration is moving closer to approving a massive new oil and natural gas drilling project in northeast Utah that could produce millions of barrels of oil and create thousands of jobs but that environmentalists fear would worsen the region's air quality.

At issue is the Bureau of Land Management's draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the proposed Monument Butte Area Oil and Gas Development Project in a heavily drilled section of the Uinta Basin that contains more than 3,300 producing oil and gas wells.

BLM's "preferred alternative" in the draft EIS proposes allowing 5,058 new oil and gas wells to be drilled in the next 16 years, covering more than 9,800 acres of mostly federal land within a massive 119,000-acre planning area.

BLM plans to formally publish the draft EIS in tomorrow's *Federal Register*, kicking off a 45-day public comment period ending Feb. 4. The agency has set three open-house meetings next month to gather public input.

"This important project milestone underscores the BLM's commitment to facilitating oil and gas development using a balanced approach that supports energy production on public lands in Utah where it's most appropriate while also safeguarding wildlife, livestock grazing and public health," said BLM Utah State Director Juan Palma.

The agency is targeting completion of a final EIS in September 2014 and a record of decision approving the project the following month, said Stephanie Howard, a BLM project manager in Vernal, Utah, overseeing the agency's review of the Monument Butte project.

The project is proposed by Newfield Exploration Co., which estimates the project could produce more than 330 million barrels of oil and 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas through 2035, Howard said.

If approved, the project would have an economic impact of \$2.1 billion annually and create 10,800 new jobs, said Kathleen Sgamma, vice president of government and public affairs for the Denver-based Western Energy Alliance.

"It's good to see progress on the EIS," Sgamma said. "It will have significant job and economic impacts for the state of Utah and the country."

But the proposal has sparked some environmental concerns.

BLM's preferred alternative scales back Newfield's proposal, which has been under federal review since 2010. The company's proposal calls for drilling 5,750 wells with a total surface disturbance of more than 16,000 acres. The proposal also calls for building 243 miles of new roads and pipelines and 21 new compressor stations.

BLM's preferred alternative, however, proposes reducing the number of wells by nearly 700, and the total surface disturbance to 9,800 acres through the use of horizontal drilling techniques. It also proposes allowing 73 miles of new roads and pipelines and 17 new compressor stations.

The agency wants to lay out the project in a way that avoids impacts to two federally threatened cacti, including the Pariette cactus, which is the focus of the Pariette Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Battling wintertime ozone

The biggest potential environmental obstacle is air quality.

The Uinta Basin is dealing with a wintertime ground-level ozone pollution problem marked by stagnant air that allows pollution emitted mostly by drilling operations to collect in the lower atmosphere and then be converted into ozone by sunlight and heat reflecting off snowpack on the ground.

Air monitors last winter measured ozone concentrations in the Uinta Basin well above the federal eight-hour standard of 75 parts per billion set by U.S. EPA. Ozone concentrations above the EPA threshold can trigger asthma attacks and inflame the conditions of those suffering from bronchitis and emphysema.

A two-year study led by the Utah Department of Environmental Quality, together with EPA, and partly funded by \$2 million contributed by members of the Western Energy Alliance, concluded that oil and gas drilling operations are the primary source of the ozone problem ([EnergyWire](#), Feb. 20).

BLM, the state and EPA are continuing modeling efforts in the basin to pinpoint effective pollution-control strategies.

The prospect of adding more than 5,000 new oil and gas wells in the basin concerns Brian Moench, president of Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment in Salt Lake City.

"It's not possible to precisely state just how much this project would increase air pollution in the Uinta Basin, but it is certainly accurate to say that this will make an already significant public health problem even worse," said Moench, an anesthesiologist by training.

In addition to ozone, he noted that the basin has high levels of particulate matter pollution and that the combination of the two "probably has synergistic health consequences," he said.

"Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment have been fielding calls from residents and health care providers who think they are having unusually high rates of adverse birth outcomes and high infant mortality," he said. "Our preliminary look at the data suggests their concern is warranted."

Given the latest ozone monitoring and ongoing studies in the basin, the new wells will likely exacerbate the wintertime ozone problem, said Jeremy Nichols, climate and energy program director for WildEarth Guardians.

"I will be anxious to see how BLM justifies this," Nichols said. "I'm skeptical that they can find a way to cram in 5,000 new wells and still be able to say they are doing everything they can to clean the air."

But Howard, the BLM project manager, said the agency is mandating a number of significant mitigation measures on Newfield that will result in the first few years of the project in a "net zero" impact on air quality in the region.

The requirements include the use of electric-driven compressor engines at well sites, where feasible, instead of diesel-powered engines that can contribute to air pollution.

"We're using electricity where we can," Howard said.

BLM has also added ozone-monitoring requirements so that if pollution levels do spike in the area, it will automatically trigger mandates to install additional pollution controls, she said.

"We are using all the latest best management practices, including some that were developed in the last month or two by the state of Utah, including ones targeting ozone precursors," she said.