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(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) A team of environmentalists, government officials and ranchers are working to come up with solutions to problems with the health of the aspen stands on Monroe Mountain. (Left to right) Kevin Mueller, program director of the Utah Environmental Congress, Stanley Kitchen, a botanist with the U.S. Forest Service and Tom Tippetts, grazing improvement coordinator with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food share a laugh while walking through a stand in the area of Upper Box Creek Reservoir.

## Utah suit seeks to block latest Uinta drilling project

Oil boom » Berry Petroleum project would include hundreds of wells in southern Duchesne County.

By Brian Maffly | The Salt Lake Tribune  
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Environmentalists are suing to invalidate the U.S. Forest Service's authorization of a 400-well project in the Uinta Basin, alleging drilling on this scale would degrade wildlife habitat, water and air quality, roadless lands and other resources already stressed by the region's oil and gas boom.

Development is underway on the Ashley National Forest's 26,000-acre South Unit, 11 miles south of Duchesne, where the Bureau of Land Management authorized Berry Petroleum to drill 44 wells before a final Environmental Impact Statement was issued two years ago.

"The national forests were created to protect clean water and clean air and wildlife habitat. The Forest Service has a higher bar to protect the environment than the BLM," said Kevin Mueller, Utah-Southern Rockies conservation manager for WildEarth Guardians. "One of those requirements is to protect roadless areas. The ones we are most concerned about punch new roads into roadless. They are big enough to let two big oil trucks pass each other. This is a new major road that could have been avoided while still allowing reasonable access to the minerals."

Mueller's group filed a petition earlier this month in Salt Lake City's U.S. District Court that seeks to block further drilling, noting that various federal agencies have conceded the project would degrade air and water quality.

The Forest Service is requiring Berry to confine its 400 wells to 162 pads using directional drilling. The oil field would take up to 20 years to drill and its production life would last 50 years.

As is their custom in regards to pending litigation, the Forest Service and the BLM declined to comment. Phone messages left with LINN Energy, a Houston-based company that recently acquired Berry, were not returned.

In 2011, the BLM fined Berry \$2 million for inappropriate operations on its Uinta holdings, and the Interior Department later proposed barring Berry from further oil and gas leasing on federal minerals for three years, according to Berry's financial disclosures. The company resolved the matter without admitting fault.

Berry is a major player in the Uinta Basin drilling boom, currently producing the equivalent of 7,500 barrels of oil and gas a day from its various fields.

According to the new lawsuit, the 400-well South Unit project would add to a plethora of impacts associated with the Uinta boom that are harming air quality not only in the basin, but also along the urban Wasatch Front, where most of the basin's waxy crude is trucked for refining.

"On a regional level," the suit states, "the compounded consequences of these industrial projects are jeopardizing the public health and welfare, continually impinging on sage grouse populations, intact wildlife habitats and chances for recreation."

According to a map prepared by Wild Utah Project, 74 of the 400 authorized wells have been approved in the South Unit project area. Some 31 wells on 10 pads are inside inventoried roadless areas.

These leases were issued before the 2001 Roadless Rule, which limits development inside national forests' inventoried roadless areas. The Forest Service authorized construction of 57 miles of new roads and upgrades on 20 miles of existing roads. Because of the viscous quality of Uinta crude, Berry's oil production would be trucked out, while natural gas would be moved out through a 87-mile network of pipelines and four compressor stations.

"This suit is about drawing the line on fracking in the Uinta Basin," said Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth's energy program director, referring to the controversial drilling practice of pumping water underground to help free up oil and gas. "The oil and gas industry is turning public lands in this region into an industrial wasteland and now they're eyeing the Ashley National Forest, the last refuge for wildlife, roadless areas, and uncontaminated air and water. This fossil fuel madness has to stop."