

Scoping Notice and Formal Comment Period

Environmental Effects Analysis

Williams Production RMT Co. West Cripple Creek Plan of Development

US Forest Service
Douglas Ranger District
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests
and
Thunder Basin National Grassland
Campbell County, Wyoming

Proposed Action

The US Forest Service (Forest Service) proposes to authorize Williams Production RMT Co. (Williams) to conduct surface operations associated with accessing, drilling, testing and completing fourteen (14) coal bed natural gas (CBNG) wells located on National Forest System (NFS) lands in Campbell County, Wyoming on Thunder Basin National Grassland. The legal descriptions of NFS lands that would be affected by the proposed action are: T. 42 N., R. 72 W.; parts of Sections 14, 15, 22, 23 & 27 (see attached map).

Disturbance and operation on NFS lands would consist of the following:

1. 14 CBNG wells
 - a. None of the well pads would be constructed (*i.e.*, require dirt work). Only mowing of vegetation would be done to provide a clear work area at each drilling site. Disturbance during construction at each location would include approximately 120 feet X 140 feet for a total area impacted of 5.4 acres.
 - b. Reserve pits would be constructed at each drilling site. These reserve pits would each be approximately 25 feet X 40 feet. The total disturbance from temporary soil removal for reserve pits across the whole project would be about 0.3 acres.
 - c. The final footprint of each well location would be approximately 20 feet X 30 feet for a total project-wide operational footprint of about 0.2 acres (not including roads).
2. Two header buildings (each building serves as a collection facility for natural gas and water)
 - a. Construction of the header buildings would result in an initial disturbance of approx. 1.0 acre.
 - b. The operational footprint of the two header buildings would be approx. 0.4 acres after interim reclamation is complete.
3. Access to the wells & header buildings
 - a. Use of existing all-weather roads = approx. 2.8 miles
 - b. Use of existing two-track roads = approx. 3.5 miles
 - c. Constructed all-weather roads to access header buildings = approx. 0.3 miles (approx. 1.9 acres)
NOTE: These roads are not visible on the attached map because they are too small to display at the map scale used.
 - d. Constructed two-tracks roads for well access = approx. 1.0 miles (approx. 5.9 acres)
 - e. TOTAL NEW DISTURBANCE = approx. 7.8 acres
 - f. NOTE: All disturbance resulting from road construction that is outside of the road's travel surface would be reclaimed as early as possible in the project.

4. Utility corridors
 - a. adjacent to existing all-weather roads = approx. 10.3 acres
 - b. adjacent to existing two-track roads = approx. 12.7 acres
 - c. adjacent to constructed all-weather roads = approx. 1.1 acres
 - d. adjacent to constructed two-track roads = approx. 3.5 acres
 - e. not adjacent to any roads = approx. 2.0 acres
 - f. TOTAL NEW DISTURBANCE = approx. 29.6 acres
 - g. NOTE: Disturbances resulting from installation of buried utilities would be entirely reclaimed as early as possible in the project.
5. All water produced through this project would be transported via underground pipeline to be used on adjacent private lands.

TOTAL AREA OF POTENTIAL CONSTRUCTION IMPACTS (BEFORE ANY RECLAMATION) =
APPROX. **44.3 ACRES** (NOTE: Not all impacts would result in loss of vegetation. This area would include the mowed drilling sites, driving over vegetation, etc.)

TOTAL AREA OCCUPIED BY FINAL PROJECT (AFTER INTERIM RECLAMATION COMPLETE) =
APPROX. **2.4 ACRES** (This area would include new roads, 2 header buildings, and 14 CBNG wells.)

NOTE: Interim reclamation includes all activities to reclaim disturbances and impacts to soils, vegetation, etc. resulting from construction operations so that the area occupied by facilities, roads, etc. is kept to a minimum during the proposed project's lifetime. Final reclamation would occur after the end of proposed project's lifetime and all facilities removed to the fullest extent determined through documentation of a Forest Service decision as required by National Environmental Policy Act regulations.

Under the terms of the Federal oil and gas leases where the wells are proposed, Williams has a legal right to explore, develop, and produce natural gas from the areas defined in the leases. For operations on a lease on NFS lands, the Forest Service has the authority and responsibility to regulate all surface-disturbing activities conducted pursuant to the lease. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has the authority and responsibility to regulate drilling, down-hole operations, production activities, and certain surface activities directly associated with drilling, down-hole operations and production of oil and/or natural gas.

Through the environmental analysis process, the Forest Service and BLM Responsible Officials will determine where and under what terms and conditions Williams may develop the oil and gas leases while protecting the natural resources and providing for public safety. Surface developments are required to be consistent with the direction contained in the 2001 Land and Resource Management Plan for Thunder Basin National Grassland (Grassland Plan), the April 2003 Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan Amendments for the Powder River Basin Oil and Gas Project (WY-070-02-065), and other applicable laws and regulations. The purpose of the environmental analysis is to evaluate the site-specific means by which Williams may develop these CBNG wells on NFS lands.

Purpose and Need

The Douglas District Ranger has identified a *need* to authorize Williams to use NFS lands subject to Federal oil and gas leases for operations associated with drilling and producing natural gas from fourteen (14) CBNG wells.

The *purpose* of this action is to facilitate production of energy resources and allow Williams to exercise lease rights and perform surface use operations, including facilities, associated with drilling fourteen (14) CBNG wells, testing them for production capability, and completing them for production if they are so capable, or plugging and abandoning the wells and reclaiming the locations if the wells are non-productive.

Additionally, this project would help meet the public's need for natural gas to avoid the loss of Federal mineral resources. Potential natural gas from the leases would return royalty revenues to the Federal Treasury.

There are numerous oil and gas leases present in the Hilight Bill Geographic Area of Thunder Basin National Grassland. The desired condition is to comply with required laws, regulations and the Grassland Plan for oil and gas leases.

The objective of this project is to honor all valid, existing, legal mineral rights and to ensure that reclamation provisions of operating plans are completed to standard. The project objective is supported by the following:

1. This project would serve to meet the goal in the Grassland Plan to improve the capability of the nation's Forests and Grasslands to provide a desired sustainable level of uses, values, products, and services.
2. This project would help implement the Federal government's policy to foster and encourage mineral development as expressed in the Mining and Minerals Policy Act of 1970.
3. This project would fulfill the goals of the 1920 Mineral Leasing Act as amended which promotes the development of oil and gas resources.
4. This project would be consistent with Executive Order Number 13212 – Actions to Expedite Energy-Related Projects.

The measurement for this project, *i.e.*, the decision that the authorized officers will make regarding this proposal, is to determine if this proposal allows for the timely development of the mineral lease as stated in the objectives while minimizing impacts to other resources and uses.

Lease Requirements

The proposed wells would be drilled on the following Federal oil & gas leases: Serial No. WYW112138, Serial No. WYW009584, Serial No. WYW136679, Serial No. WYW140942, and Serial No. WYW140779. Some of the above leases have special stipulations for the protection of surface resources within the lease. Wherever there are no special stipulations for the protection of surface resources attached to a lease, the standards and guidelines in the Grassland Plan would apply.

Project Area Description

The proposed project area is located approximately 10 miles south of Wright, Wyoming, on NFS lands administered as Thunder Basin National Grassland by the Douglas Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests & Thunder Basin National Grassland. It is located within the Hilight Bill Geographic Area (Grassland Plan, p. 2-21). The proposed project area lies between the Spring Creek & Porcupine Creek drainages (see attached map).

To access the proposed project area, drive south from Wright, Wyoming, via Wyoming Hwy 59 for approximately 10 miles to National Forest System Road (NFSR) #910C. Turn west and enter the project area. The project area is located about 4 miles north-northwest of the Isenberger Ranch (see attached map).

The terrain in the proposed project area is flat to gently rolling. Vegetation present in the area includes sagebrush, grasses and forbs. Sagebrush and grassland community wildlife species inhabit the area, including: prairie dogs, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, sage grouse, ferruginous hawk, Swainson's hawk, golden eagle and other raptors.

Grassland Plan Management Area Prescription

The Management Prescription for the project area is 6.1 – Rangeland with Broad Resource Emphasis (Grassland Plan, p. 3-25). The desired condition places an emphasis on:

This MA (Management Area) will display low to high levels of livestock grazing developments (such as fences and water developments), oil and gas facilities, and roads.

Livestock will graze most areas annually, but a spectrum of vegetation structure and a high degree of biodiversity will be present. Livestock grazing intensity will vary; however, moderate use will prevail over most of the MA. Natural disturbance processes, including grazing and fire, will be used to emulate the natural range of variability of vegetation structure and composition (see matrix objectives in Geographic Area direction). Rest and prescribed fire will be incorporated into the landscape.

Prairie dog colonies will increase in some areas of the MA.

When no substantial threat to high-value resources occurs, natural outbreaks of native insects and disease will be allowed to proceed without intervention.

Further direction may be found in Chapters 1 and 2 of the Grassland Plan.

Well Sites

A Douglas Ranger District interdisciplinary team performed onsite inspections of the proposed well locations and proposed project area on July 1, 2008. The locations are consistent with Federal oil & gas lease terms and the Grassland Plan including special lease stipulations.

No drilling pads for any of the proposed wells would be constructed. Instead, the vegetation would be mowed to an area of about 120 feet X 140 feet (0.4 acres) at each of the fourteen (14) well locations. The wellheads would be located on this area.

The amount of ground disturbance is anticipated to be consistent with estimates provided in the Grassland Plan. Facilities will meet color and tone visual requirements. **Total disturbance associated with the proposed project on NFS lands is expected to be approximately 44.3 acres (prior to completion of interim reclamation) for the well site. After interim reclamation is complete, the proposed project would occupy approximately 2.4 acres.**

If production is obtained, portions of the locations not needed for production facilities will be reclaimed with native vegetation reestablished. There will be no pits utilized for production. At the end of production or if the well is plugged and abandoned without going into production, the location and access roads will be restored to a condition approximating that prior to disturbance and operation. The site and all disturbed areas will be reclaimed and reseeded in accordance with Forest Service requirements.

Special Investigations

A Class III cultural resource inventory and report, biological assessment/biological evaluation (for both botany and wildlife), and paleontological resources survey and certification will be completed. Forest Service resource specialists will review these preliminary documents and prepare final specialist reports as part of the environmental effects analysis process. Under applicable laws and direction, the Forest Service could require that some operations associated with developing this proposed project be delayed or relocated in order to mitigate any adverse impacts on natural resources.

Relevant Laws

The Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, as amended, and the Mineral Leasing Act for Acquired Lands of 1947, as amended, grants the Department of Interior the responsibility and authority for management of certain Federal leaseable minerals, including oil and gas, on BLM, National Forest, and other Federal lands. Under the Department of Interior, the BLM carries out these responsibilities. For NFS lands, the 1987 Federal Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act (an amendment to the 1920 Mineral Leasing Act) granted the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to regulate all surface-disturbing activities conducted pursuant to any lease issued under the Act (oil and gas leases). Under the Secretary of Agriculture, the Forest Service carries out these responsibilities.

The Grassland Plan provides standards and guidelines for oil and gas development on Thunder Basin National Grassland. The Federal oil & gas leases will be developed in accordance with those standards and guidelines where they do not conflict with existing lease rights.

Decisions to be Made

The Responsible Officials for the Forest Service and BLM will determine the terms and conditions under which Williams may occupy the surface and develop the oil and gas leases while protecting natural resources and providing for public access and safety.

The Responsible Official for the Forest Service will provide final approval of the Master Surface Use Plan of Operations including Conditions of Approval for the proposed CBNG wells on NFS land.

The Responsible Official for the BLM will provide final approval of the Master Drilling Plan and the Applications for Permit to Drill for the proposed CBNG wells on NFS land. The Applications for Permit to Drill include the Master Surface Use Plan of Operations and the Master Drilling Plan.

Comments Requested

At this time, the Forest Service seeks information, comments and other assistance from Federal, State, and local agencies, and other individuals or organizations that have an interest in or could be affected by the proposed action. While public comments are welcome at any time, comments received during the official comment period will be most useful for the identification of issues and development and analysis of alternatives to the proposal. Comments should be as specific as possible.

No public participation other than this request for comments is planned. All persons who provide comment in response to this request will continue to receive information about this project and will be included in any additional public participation effort that may occur. Those who do not respond will not receive additional information. To be able to appeal, any person, non-Federal agency or entity has to provide comment or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the end of the comment period. The official comment period is 30 days after the publication of the legal notice in the *Casper Star Tribune* newspaper.

The name and mailing address of the commenter must be provided with his/her comments for appellant standing and so that future documents pertaining to this environmental analysis and the decision can be

provided to them. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however, those persons submitting anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215.

Send written comments to the Responsible Official: Robert Sprentall, District Ranger, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 East Richards Street, Douglas, WY 82633, Attention: Vernon E. Koehler. Faxed comments will also be accepted at: 307-358-7107.

E-mail comments may be sent to: comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt-douglas-thunder-basin@fs.fed.us Our system will accept .rtf and .doc file formats. If comments are electronically mailed, the sender should receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive such confirmation, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Comments may be hand delivered to the Douglas Ranger District office between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays.

Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and, if the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with name and address within 10 days.

Contact Person Information

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This public scoping notice and the project map are available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr/projects/mineral/index.shtml>

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