

A proposed development of five thousand gas and oil wells, 16 wells to a pad, is at issue in Converse County. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) jurisdiction extends to 64 percent of the 1.5 million acres. Part of it is Thunder Basin National Grasslands, managed by the U.S. Forest Service. State and private lands comprise the rest.

Does Converse County need another five thousand gas and oil wells at a cost of 50,000 to 80,000 gallons of water per well? How you answer the question will depend on who you are.

If you are a landowner on the proposed development, with minerals rights that beckon royalties, you'll say, "Bring 'em on!" In your imagination you've already spent the windfall, and you certainly don't want to compromise your dream.

If you are one of the victims of the 2012 gas-well blowout near Douglas, you'll say, "No way!" You'll recall how your neighbors and you fled as a cloud of poison rolled in, looking like a sandstorm, invading your subdivision. You remember that the "technical failure" was due to human error, that is to say, lack of diligence. Chesapeake's delayed response to the emergency was along the same lines, yet it was levied no fines. You'll charge that 2 million cubic feet of gas escaped that day, and that this gas contributes even more powerfully to the Greenhouse Effect than CO₂.

If you are the governor of Wyoming, you will state that, to prosper, our state needs fossil-fuel development, and that the good of the state outweighs the suffering of the few. As for emissions, you'll remark that China and India are spewing greenhouse gases at furious rates.

If you are a wildlife warden, you'll point out that much of the 1.5 million acres is host to sensitive wildlife, Pronghorn and elk will be deprived of grazing range. As for sage grouse, you'll note that Clait Braun, who has studied them for forty years, recently blasted Wyoming's "core area plan" under which 60 percent of the imperiled birds perished from 2006 to 2013. "The future is bleak if you are a grouse," said Dr. Braun.

If you are a scientist studying the climate, you'll shout, "We need to go the other way: Reduce, not increase production and consumption!" You'll point to the glaciers and ice fields that are melting at alarming rates. The Arctic is now largely ice-free in summer, which translates into hotter temps at the pole: Where previously its ice-cover reflected back into space most of the sunshine falling on it, now the dark surface of the water absorbs the sun's rays, which only adds to runaway melting and rising seas. In the past 25 years polar bear populations declined by 30 percent. Untold plants and animals have gone extinct altogether, to the detriment of life on earth (and our food chain).

If you are a reader of current affairs, you'll raise a recent Associated Press (AP) review that found, in Wyoming, BLM failed to inspect 632 of the 1,400 high-risk wells that need inspection across the nation. BLM's designation of "High Priority Wells" is based on greater need to protect against possible water contamination and other environmental and safety issues—for example, near national forests or fragile watersheds, or when otherwise identified as higher pollution risks, or when the well is near a high-pressure formation, or when a drill operator lacks a record of service. In view of the agency's failure to inspect even highly problematical wells—never mind all the others—would it not be prudent to keep BLM land out of harm's way?

But what if you are the BLM project manager in charge of compiling an environmental impact statement on the proposed development? If you are manager only so long as there is a project to manage, what sorts of decisions are you likely to make? Will you avoid consideration of the likely leakage from high-risk wells that are bound to remain uninspected? On the wildlife issue, recently BLM approved drilling in Nevada on “priority sage grouse habitat,” claiming fracking will have “no significant impact” on the imperiled habitat: Will that be your standard?

When I raised the AP Review with Mr. Robinson in recent telephone conversation, he said he had heard of it but was unacquainted with the details. I said AP quoted BLM Deputy Director Linda Lance that “The current rate of inspections is simply not acceptable to us.”

Now through June 30th is the comment period on the Converse County conundrum. Written comments may be sent to Mike Robinson, Project Manager, 2987 Prospector Dr. Casper, WY 82604; emails go to blm_wy_casper_wymail@blm.gov. Mr. Robinson can be reached by phone at 261-7520.