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Editorial

BLM lets down its Wyo. Guard

As natural gas drilling rigs sprouted on the tumbling prairie near Pinedale, Wyo., officials at the local office of the Bureau of Land Management were in an anything-goes state of mind. Though the agency had promised to do so, the BLM neglected to track air pollution and the levels of lake acidification in nearby wilderness areas.

This was revealed in an agency memo that recently was leaked to the public.

According to the memo, the BLM also failed to monitor and limit harm to wildlife in a swath of southwestern Wyoming known for its rugged beauty and once-pristine airshed. In fact, there was often "no evaluation, analysis or compiling" of data tracking the environmental consequences of drilling, which has even caused deer and sage grouse populations to decline.

Again, sadly, those aren't the claims of some wild-eyed environmental group that might be dismissed as propaganda or paranoia. Those are the facts as the BLM sees them. An internal agency document details all of the things the BLM, and the companies drilling in the area, have failed to do to protect Wyoming public lands.

"The facts are no surprise whatsoever," Bruce Pendery, program director for the Wyoming Outdoor Council, told The Washington Post. "What is new is that, instead of us grumbling about the BLM not doing what it said it would do, the agency itself is acknowledging that this is the case."

Wyoming has trillions of cubic feet of natural gas under its terrain, which has energy companies salivating as the market for natural gas rises nationally.

More than 3,000 wells already have been drilled in the Upper Green River Basin, and gas companies want 10,000 more. The BLM recently approved a new management plan for the Jonah Field, where most of the drilling is occurring, that would allow for about 3,100 wells. Even the BLM's own analysis suggests that level of development could diminish air quality as far north as Grand Teton National Park.

In the years the BLM failed to monitor emissions, the level of nitrous oxides in the Pinedale area exceeded levels the agency said could adversely impact air quality in the area. Nitrous oxide is a component of smog, not something we ever want associated with the open skies of rural Wyoming.

When the BLM began approving new drilling in the area about six years ago, it said energy companies had to safeguard the basin's huge wildlife herds, which are part of the Greater

Yellowstone Ecosystem. Pronghorn antelope travel hundreds of miles in the autumn from Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks into the lands near Pinedale and then migrate to winter grazing near Rock Springs. It's considered to be the longest North American mammal migration outside of Alaska.

While rich in energy resources, this part of Wyoming is also rich in other natural resources that must be protected.

It's important for a myriad of reasons, national security chief among them, for the U.S. to wean itself off foreign energy sources. However, there are ways to develop our resources without endangering wildlife and despoiling natural habitats, recreational opportunities, agriculture, water needs and clean skies.

Industry should take the lead, and when it doesn't, it's imperative that agencies such as the BLM are there to serve as watchdogs and to not just rush through more permits to drill.