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Citadel in the sand

By JACK CLINTON Special to the Star-Tribune Wednesday, July 02, 2003

Twenty miles south of Route 80 on the Bitter Creek Road, traffic disappears. After forty miles, there are no fresh tracks in the layer of dust on the dirt road, and there is still no sign of Adobe Town. Wild horses run nervously away across a dry lake bed, kicking up huge white clouds from the clay and alkali soil. Giant dust devils mimic the horse herds, spinning inverted white funnels to improbable heights.

Then, about 50 miles from the highway, at the top of a subtle ridge, the earth drops away and Adobe Town tumbles down from the ridge. Below, Desolation Flats stretches away and fades into the eastern horizon.

The air is hot and dry and the silence is staggering.

The songs of horned larks and sage thrashers, break the quiet now and then in stark contrast to the utter stillness. The landscape appears equally empty, and it seems that little could live in such a dry and vacant space. Yet, with binoculars, antelope appear in the sage-covered dunes along the Adobe Town rim, and distant white and black dots mark grazing horse herds.

The comment period for the environmental impact statement (EIS) on the Desolation Flats gas project has run out. Gas industry and environmentalists alike now wait for the final draft of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) project plan. The roughly 233,000-acre Desolation Flats project area is located about 21 miles south of Wamsutter and 14 miles west of Baggs.

The project proposes drilling almost 400 natural gas wells in the Flats, bringing 500 miles of roads, more than \$800 million in investments and, the companies behind the proposal hope, the kind of raw profit that would make such an undertaking attractive.

The area to be drilling lies in plain view of the Adobe Town wilderness study area, and environmentalists and federal land managers contend that the project would utterly change the nature of this area.

As well as holding mineral wealth, this area is also valuable to the high desert ecology of southern Wyoming. It is a crucial big game winter range for elk, deer, and antelope. It is also important for endangered species such as sage grouse, mountain plovers, and ferruginous hawks.

Wild horse herds also find sanctuary in this desert environment, but more importantly, says Eric Molvar of Biodiversity Associates, is that this area is an increasingly rare, pristine, intact parcel of Wyoming's high desert environment.

"This land is much the same as it was in the 1800s when Butch Cassidy and his gang hid out around



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The Pipeline

Adobe Town. This corner of the Red Desert deserves to be preserved for the benefit of the public for generations to come," Molvar said.

The Gridiron

The proposed Drilling area would stretch across 233,000 acres, and have an estimated life of 20-40 years. John Spehar, The Planning and Environmental Coordinator for the BLM office in Rawlins, says that it is indeed a large project and that the area will be permanently changed by the impact of it.

**Sports
Goulash**

"After the project begins, anyone who goes there seeking the current pristine desert qualities simply isn't going to find it," Spehar said.

**The
Lockerroom**

According to Dru Bower of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, the financial gain and the boost to the nation's energy needs validate the project, which could demand a capital investment of \$840 million. Bower estimates that every twenty wells will produce approximately 5 billion cubic feet of gas per year, while the spin off of jobs could create a \$372 million payroll over the life of the project.

Wild Things

Although this project would feed Wyoming's current gas boon, Molvar feels the BLM's EIS is fundamentally flawed.

**Inside and
Out**

"The BLM proposes over 500 miles of roads and 361 well sites, and they fail to locate any of them; all we know is that they'll be somewhere out there on 233,00 acres of public land, in plain view of Adobe Town."

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Dan Heilig of the Wyoming Outdoor Council agrees that the BLM's EIS is flawed, mainly because it fails to account for similar projects of the same magnitude all across southern and central Wyoming.

"The accumulation of these projects adds up to thousands of wells, and industrializes vast rural areas, without regard for endangered species, sensitive environments or possible wilderness areas," Heilig said.

The vistas and formations of this area are reminiscent of, and perhaps rival, many of the qualities of the national parks and monuments in the Utah's desert.

Adobe Town is a land of eroding stratified soft stone which has formed pillars, spires, and fortress-like buttes. The stratified layers of volcanic origin take on an illusion of masonry, giving it the austere appearance of an abandoned citadel. Although it is no Grand Teton, or Yellowstone Park, the magnitude of the high desert solitude of Adobe Town is awe inspiring.

The primary comment period ended Tuesday, and the final draft will be out by in the fall followed by another public comment period. Future impact on Adobe Town could also be managed under the BLM Great Divide Resource Management Plan, which the Rawlins office is currently drafting and is due out later this year.

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