

Atlantic Rim Review Team meeting June 18th 2014

The intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is to encourage environmental protection and informed decision-making. The purpose of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is to disclose the impacts of a proposed action, identify mitigation measures (if necessary) to moderate the impacts of those actions, and then analyze the impacts of the proposed action in the context of those mitigation measures.

The Atlantic Rim EIS and Record of Decision (ROD) is based on the principle of adaptive management, which “is a decision process that promotes flexible decision making that can be adjusted in the face of uncertainties as outcomes from management actions and other actions become better understood”. Adaptive management is generally used to monitor the effects of a decision, and incorporate new mitigation measures to address impacts of the decision. Adaptive management can both address negative impacts of the decision and positive impacts of the decision; both negative and positive effects can be used to change the management strategy.

The Atlantic Rim ROD requires that Operators demonstrate successful achievement of performance goals (listed on page 19 of the ROD) that were developed to protect various sensitive resources, including big game, sage and sharp tail grouse, sensitive fish, songbirds, and range resources. As part of the Operator-committed measures, annual work plans are to be submitted to the BLM each year to facilitate planning. The ROD also identifies a Review Team comprised of the BLM, representatives from various State agencies, and the Operators. The goal of the Review Team is to work cohesively to identify mitigation measures and implement the performance-based approach outlined in the ROD, with the assistance of working groups.

Annual work plans are to include details for pad and well locations, pipeline routes, water transfer stations, road locations, road construction techniques, and BMP placements. The information should be geo-referenced.

Working Group Updates

The mule deer working group is in the process of developing adaptive management measures for mule deer.

The sage grouse working group has developed a draft paper proposing thresholds for sage grouse that, if exceeded, would indicate the need for the working group to reconvene to determine what may be affecting sage grouse in the project area.

There is very little core area in the Atlantic Rim Project Area (ARPA), and for the most part the thresholds identified in the sage grouse paper does not align directly with core area policy. However, the working group is trying to maintain viable, well distributed populations in the non-core areas within Atlantic Rim and the mitigations that could be developed if the thresholds are reached would be to maintain populations over the landscape.

A lek complex is considered all the leks that located within 1.5 miles of each other, between which males and female birds move; there is an exchange between the hens and the males birds. The concept of a lek complex recognizes that birds move around and do not always stay on the same lek.

Industry is financing another season of songbird monitoring.

The Muddy Creek sensitive fish working group has planned their annual erosion tour for July 1st, and companies are expected to submit their BMP reports (in the form of Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plans) by July 15th.

Conservative Approach

Working group members are in the process of identifying recommendations for the Review Team as to what a conservative approach entails. The ROD states that in the absence of information demonstrating successful achievement of performance goals, the BLM would take a conservative approach when considering additional approvals. However, the ROD does not go on to define what is meant by a conservative approach, so the working groups are in the process of defining this.

Because industry doesn't propose to drill more than 25 wells per year for the near future, there was some discussion that this is a conservative approach, especially considering that the ROD projected there would be 200 wells drilled per year at this point. However, if natural gas prices increase in the near future, the working groups and the Review Team need to be prepared for the potential that more than 25 wells would be drilled per year. The minimum requirement of 25 wells per year was established by the BLM's Reservoir Management Group (RMG) and, in fact, more than 25 wells will be drilled this year if we take into account wells drilled on fee, state, and federal.

Warren Annual Operating Plan

Warren is apparently participating in cooperation with the WGFD from Baggs in predator control, in the form of raven control, in order to help deer, antelope, and sage grouse populations. However, it should be noted here that this has not been proposed as part of the Atlantic Rim Review Team's process and should not be connected with any part of the implementation of the Atlantic Rim ROD.

Warren added soil amendments to several challenging sites last year in order to aid with reclamation. Several of the sites had very high electrical conductivity values, which inhibits vegetation growth. The soils were treated with various amendments; however, it takes some time before the amendments can be effective and is dependent on precipitation. Warren is also interested in pursuing the planting of non-natives and will be submitting a sundry to propose the use of non-natives in some areas. The BLM would be required to complete an environmental assessment (EA) to determine the potential effects of introducing non-native species into the area. There are some wellpads located on fee that apparently have had good success with growing non-natives, and the information obtained from these sites may be used in the EA.

Warren is required to drill 23 wells by September 24th, 2014, and another 25 wells by September 2015. The majority of these wells will be drilled this year. Timing stipulations apparently make it difficult to complete the entire required drilling program in one year. However, these timing stipulations are requirements of the ROD. They can be excepted using exception requests that are approved on a case by case basis by the authorized officer; Warren is welcome to submit a request for extended exceptions and these would be analyzed through a working group and the Review Team process.

Warren also discussed how they felt that they were contributing to the successful achievement of the performance goals.

Escalera Resources Annual operating plan

Escalera does not plan on doing any drilling this year; however, they do intend to begin cleaning up and dealing with some of the issues out in their area, particularly the weed problem.

A few years ago, Escalera (Double Eagle, at the time) had proposed treating additional (beyond what was already authorized) produced water and discharging it to surface water via Muddy Creek. Currently, there is nothing planned to continue this direction and this type of disposal is not the preferred method of disposal.

Adaptive Management Discussion

Industry has the potential to propose something different than what has always been done within the Atlantic Rim framework. For example, if there are some areas within Atlantic Rim that are not habitat for mule deer, or other sensitive species that require timing stipulations, then perhaps drilling activity could occur longer into the season in this area than in other areas. Industry would need to submit this request and it would work through the working groups and Review Team process.