

# Powder River Basin Coal Review

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## Questions & Answers

### **What is the Powder River Basin (PRB) Coal Review?**

The PRB coal review is a regional technical study that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is conducting to help evaluate the impacts of coal development in the PRB. It consists of three tasks: Task 1 identifies current conditions in the PRB and, for applicable resources, updates the BLM's 1996 status check for coal development in the PRB; Task 2 develops a forecast of reasonably foreseeable coal, coal-related, and other industrial development in the PRB through 2020; and, Task 3 predicts the cumulative impacts that could be expected to occur to air, water, socioeconomic, and other resources if the development occurs as projected. The Task 3 databases and reports will be available for use in evaluating cumulative impacts in future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents.

In 2010, the second phase of the PRB coal review was started. This will update reasonably foreseeable development in line with new forecasts to year 2030 and will use best available modeling technology for air quality effects, as well as updating all Task 1, 2, and 3 reports to year 2030.

The PRB coal review is **neither** a policy review, **nor** is it an analysis of the impacts of project-specific development(s). There are no policies, regulatory actions, or proposed actions being evaluated in this review.

The Task 1, 2, and 3 reports are parts of a technical study, not a NEPA document. They were not prepared to evaluate specific proposed projects and do not include the project-specific mitigation that would be included in NEPA analyses that would be developed to evaluate proposed projects.

### **What types of activities are being evaluated?**

The study primarily addresses coal and coal-related development within the PRB. Coal-related development includes power plants, coal technology projects, railroads used to haul coal, etc. Other types of development that are being considered include oil and gas (conventional and coal bed natural gas) development, other types of mines, and water development projects.

### **What aspects of the environment are being analyzed?**

The review will focus primarily on air quality, water resources, and socioeconomics, but other physical, biological, and human resources are addressed.

### **What agencies are involved?**

The PRB coal review is a BLM project, but BLM has invited federal and state agencies with relevant technical expertise (especially air, water, and socioeconomics) to help define the technical approach and content of the project and task reports.

### **Who is funding this project?**

BLM is funding the work, which is being contracted. Federal and state agency participation is part of normal intergovernmental cooperation.

### **When did the review start, and when will it be completed?**

Work on the review began in October 2003. The description of current conditions (with the exception of water resources) and forecast portions (Tasks 1 and 2) were completed in 2005. The Task 2 report on foreseeable development was updated in 2009 based on actual development that had occurred through 2008.

The reports estimating effects of future development to air quality (Task 3A) were done in three parts, primarily to have the reports based on up-to-date emission source data. The Task 3A report on estimated effects on air quality by 2010 was completed in 2006, the 3A report for effects by 2015 was completed in 2008, and the 3A report for effects by 2020 was completed in 2009.

The reports estimating effects of future development to water (Task 3B) were done in two parts – surface and groundwater. The surface water report was completed in 2006 and updated in 2008 to include a study on reclaimed stream channel stability. The groundwater report was completed in 2009.

The reports estimating effects of future development on socioeconomics and all other resource values (Tasks 3C and 3D) were completed in 2005. An updated version of Task 3D, to reflect modeled water quality and quantity, was completed in 2009.

### **How is the public involved? When will the public get the opportunity to comment on the outcomes of the review?**

The PRB coal review results have been presented at meetings of the Powder River Regional Coal Team (RCT), a BLM advisory board, since 2005. The objective of the RCT is to provide advice and guidance to the BLM State Directors from Montana and Wyoming and the Director of the BLM regarding the federal coal management program in the PRB. RCT activities are open to the public and include opportunities for public comment.

A public open house was held in Gillette, Wyoming in May 2006 in order to present and answer questions on the PRB coal review.

The coal review reports and analysis are used and referenced in the cumulative impact analyses in NEPA documents prepared to evaluate coal leasing in the PRB and other proposed projects. The NEPA process includes several opportunities for public review and comment. BLM first used the task reports in developing the cumulative impact analysis in an environmental impact statement (EIS) that evaluated the impacts of leasing the Maysdorf federal coal tract, released in draft in 2006. Since that time the coal review analysis has been reflected in each subsequent EIS, as modified based on public comment on the analysis. The coal review analysis has been used in the work to revise the Casper, Miles City, and Buffalo RMPs.

### **What areas are included in the review?**

The PRB is a geographic area in northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana. It encompasses all of Campbell County, Wyoming, portions of Converse, Crook, Johnson, Natrona, Niobrara, Sheridan, and Weston counties, Wyoming, and portions of Big Horn, Custer, Powder River and Rosebud counties, Montana. The development forecasts look at activity in both states.

The Task 3 study areas vary for different physical, biological, and human resources. For some resources, the review area only includes potentially affected portions of the PRB; for other resources, it extends outside the PRB because the impacts extend beyond the PRB. For example, the air quality impacts are evaluated over a multi-state area because they would be expected to extend beyond the PRB, but the groundwater drawdown is evaluated in the area surrounding and extending west of the mines, because that is the area where groundwater drawdown related to surface coal mining operations would occur.

### **Why is BLM conducting this review?**

The PRB is a major energy development area with diverse environmental values. BLM and other federal and state agencies need data and analysis tools to evaluate cumulative impacts as additional development is proposed in the basin.

The PRB coal review updates historic baseline data and projects potential future cumulative effects of coal leasing and development based on reasonably foreseeable future development.

### **Why is BLM conducting the review at this time?**

The Wyoming State Office of the BLM has several pending applications to lease federal coal in the PRB. Each will require a NEPA analysis, and BLM plans to use the results of the PRB coal review in evaluating the cumulative impacts of leasing the federal coal included in these applications.

The Casper, Miles City, and Buffalo offices of BLM have made or started a revision of their resource management plan (RMP) and have used the Task 2 development forecasts from this review for those efforts.

National interest in future development in areas such as the PRB continues. BLM has the opportunity to look at resource development to evaluate the cumulative effect of projected mineral and related development for use in NEPA analyses for future proposed actions.

### **How will it affect future decision-making?**

As discussed above, BLM plans to use the task reports as tools to analyze cumulative impacts in future NEPA documents, beginning with the two EISs that BLM started in 2005 to evaluate applications to lease federal coal. The data and modeling tools that are generated should be relevant for the cumulative impact assessments for other project-specific impact assessments that BLM must prepare to comply with the requirements of NEPA by providing updated, readily available, and consistent information. The results also aid land use planning work.

Products of this study include databases of such things as future development activities, air quality, water, and socioeconomics. These databases can be updated through time and used with the existing modeling programs to generate future projections of cumulative effects.

### **What are cumulative impacts?**

A cumulative impact on the environment results from the incremental impact of an action when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

For example, a proposed action such as a mining project may temporarily disturb 5% of the habitat for a particular wildlife species in a particular area, but the combination of that action with other reasonably foreseeable activities that are likely to occur in that area during that same time period may result in disturbance that affects 25% of the habitat for that species. NEPA requires federal agencies to consider cumulative as well as project-specific impacts in evaluating proposed projects involving federal lands or resources.

### **What if you find different conclusions to previous studies such as the PRB Oil and Gas EIS and the South PRB Coal EIS?**

Because Task 1 of this review focuses on the effects of coal, coal-related, and other (e.g., oil and gas) development to the present, and Task 2 forecasts the effects of projected development into the future, the review updates the analyses presented in these earlier EISs by using more current data and by projecting development further into the future. As more data about actual development levels and actual associated impacts are collected and evaluated, conclusions based on projected development levels and projected associated impacts may need to be revised in the future to reflect the new information.

For example, the South PRB Coal EIS used the most current cumulative water impact analyses that were available when it was prepared, which were the analyses conducted for the PRB Oil and Gas EIS. Task 3 of the PRB coal review updates those analyses, using data that have been collected since they were prepared, and projects impacts to ground and surface water from coal, coal-related, and other activities through 2020, a longer horizon than used in the PRB Oil and Gas EIS.

The Task 3 analyses produced in this review addresses cumulative impacts as they relate to projected coal development activities. To do this, the review focuses on more specific projections of oil and gas activity in those places where coal activity is occurring or is projected to occur. For example, the review evaluates groundwater impacts where there is overlapping coal and oil and gas development and estimates the contribution of each activity.

### **How will this review affect BLM and State permitting and approval processes?**

This review does not change the regulatory requirements for proposed projects. It is a technical review which is intended to facilitate the assessment of cumulative impacts related to coal development and which can be considered by these agencies as they conduct future planning and permitting.

### **Will new and revised databases developed from this work be available electronically to the public and state and federal agencies?**

We plan to use only publicly available data in conducting this study. As such, the databases will be available for other agency use and can also be released to the public. These will be databases and model input data sets. Also, the final review reports will be public information.