




To: Associated Press

Fr: Clint Muhlfeld, President 

Subject: Verbal testimony on gas and oil development in Montana and the Western United States

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Good morning. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide information on the potential impacts of gas and oil development on native and recreational fisheries and aquatic ecosystems in Montana and elsewhere in the western United States.

Similar to other land-use practices, the best available scientific information suggests that the various types of energy development slated for our area pose a serious threat to the long-term persistence and integrity of fish populations and critical habitats on which they depend. Considering CBM as an example – this industry may negatively impact water quality by changing many processes that aquatic organisms have evolved with over thousands of years, including the timing and quantity of stream flows (due to road building and extraction), sedimentation rates, concentrations of salts, temperatures, species diversity, and may cause accidental spills of fuels or drilling fluids. The foremost concerns are the impacts of groundwater discharged into streams or other surface waters that have found to be highly saline, and may contain a variety of toxic substances. The effect of lowering aquifers through pumping can also have the effect of depleting late season streamflows, which are critical for remnant fish communities in the Powder and Tongue River systems in Montana.

Energy development should avoid causing further declines of sensitive fish species, including those on the endangered species list, which could result in a trend toward federal listing or continued listing under the ESA. Many fish populations have declined or been extirpated due to similar land-use activities that degrade and fragment populations and critical habitats. For example, many of the areas proposed for development in prairie streams of the Tongue and Powder River basins harbor native sensitive species such as sturgeon chub, sauger, sicklefin chub, westlope and Yellowstone cutthroat trout, and the threatened bull trout in forested streams of the Flathead and Kootenai Rivers in Montana and British Columbia.

A “take it slow” adaptive management approach would be the best approach for energy development, given all the unknowns about impacts to aquatic communities,

quality and quantify of discharge waters, salt toxicities, recipient stream hydrology, and pattern of development across the landscape. Adaptive management with information feedback loops would allow the responsible agencies to evaluate the effects of development on existing land uses and natural and cultural resources, and through this process devise strategies to prevent or reduce the detrimental effects of future development found to be irreparable.

Due to the uncertainty over the effects industries (such as CBM) have on aquatic life, it would be prudent to not allow discharge of production water to surface waters until water quality standards are developed. Furthermore, it is imperative that surface waters be assessed prior to development and monitored thereafter with a statistically meaningful and defensible monitoring program to assess potential impacts to aquatic and terrestrial organisms (biota), stream hydrology, habitat conditions, and riparian function. Further, water management plans should always develop disposal methods, such as reinjection technology, to ensure that discharged water does not threaten aquatic resources. Additionally, any development plan should address the rate and potential for cumulative effects of multiple wells being developed across the landscape.

In short, energy development needs to be managed to protect water quality, fisheries, and aquatic life, as the decisions made now will influence these important conservation and natural heritage areas for many years.