Coal Bed Methane – Too Many Unanswered Questions [TWS]

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Issues affecting people in Rosebud and Powder River Counties are felt by people in Missoula, Great Falls, Bozeman and Helena. Diminished water quality in the Tongue and Powder rivers affect all Montanans. Coal bed methane (CBM) is being pumped from coal seams in southeast Montana. High natural gas prices, cheaper drilling technology, and a need for cleaner-burning fuels has spurred rapid growth of the CBM industry. Unfortunately, there is no scientific data showing that CBM development is environmentally advisable. Why would the agricultural community be up in arms against what appears to be a benign type of development that could be a boon to local economies and create more apparent water in a semi-arid region? Montana farmers and ranchers and others who are familiar with this country are afraid because there are too many unanswered questions and too many obvious negative impacts associated with CBM development. Redstone's project on the CX Ranch at Decker presently operates 143 wells, with more to come when the permitting process allows them. According to a briefing paper prepared by DEQ, "Every minute, each well produces about 20 gallons of salty, sodium-rich water that may contain toxic substances (including arsenic and barium at concentrations exceeding water quality standards). At this rate, 30,000 wells could potentially discharge enough of this brackish water to roughly double the flow of the streams in the Powder River Basin CBM region during the irrigation season." Hundreds of active wells are presently discharging polluted water directly to Tongue and Powder River and their tributaries. Extracting methane involves pumping millions of gallons of water out of coal seams onto the land, water that cannot be used to irrigate haylands or gardens because of the salts and other dissolved solids – water that kills the vegetation and the soil. According to DEQ, other potential impacts include dewatering of local and regional aquifers, decreased natural surface water availability in some areas, increased brackish surface flow in discharge areas, miles and acres of roads and surface facilities, erosion, sedimentation, and increase of sodium and other soluble pollutants to streams that will have substantial impacts on native fish populations. There may also be ground water reduction that dries up stock water, loss of natural artesian well pressure, increased saline seep, increased air and noise pollution from compressors, lower water tables, and significant water quality degradation. Prospects of thousands more wells in this country should concern all of us. I fear not only the obvious potential impacts to Montana's surface and ground waters, but to already significantly reduced sage and sharp-tailed grouse populations, nesting neotropical birds and raptors, and impacts to daily and seasonal movements of mule deer and pronghorn, to name a few. Tongue River supports many warm, cool and cold-water gamefish species that will be negatively affected by pollution. These are just a few of the known environmental costs. On the unknown side of the ledger, DEQ admits they don't have a clear understanding of the

myriad cumulative negative effects of CBM development, and they willingly admit there are more questions than answers regarding impacts.