

Managing energy development issues to protect park resources

By John Bunyak, John Reber, and Lisa Norby

AS PART OF THE EFFORT to improve energy independence, there has been a push to streamline the development of all energy sources—particularly oil, gas, and coal-bed methane—in the western United States. The West is home to many of the nation's parks, and increases in energy development activities both outside and along park boundaries may negatively impact the air and water quality of nearby park units. National Park Service managers are also concerned about the possible impacts of new or expanded transportation pipelines or power lines through parks. In 2003, park managers were actively involved in developing strategies to minimize the potential harm to park resources from energy development activities.

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The Rocky Mountain region has been at the center of the West's energy development activities, in particular the Powder River Basin area of Montana and Wyoming. The Wyoming Powder River Basin Oil and Gas Project alone involves developing and operating approximately 39,000 new coal-bed methane wells, 3,200 oil wells, and various support facilities. The National Park Service concluded that air emissions associated with these activities could adversely impact visibility and other air quality-related values at several park units. These units include Badlands and Wind Cave National Parks, which are mandatory Class I air quality areas under the Clean Air Act. Devils Tower National Monument, Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Jewel Cave National Monument, and Mount Rushmore National Memorial, all Class II air quality areas, would also be affected.

Superintendents and natural resource staff from several of the affected parks and regional offices met with NPS Air Resources Division staff in May 2003 to discuss ways to work together to protect park resources as energy development proceeds, particularly in the Powder River Basin. Subsequently NPS staff met with representatives from the Bureau of Land Management, state agencies, tribes, and other entities to establish working groups to address the problem. The resulting air quality task group will develop a monitoring plan and an adaptive management strategy to assess and mitigate the cumulative air quality effects of coal-bed methane development.

In response to the White House energy task force and the National Energy Policy, federal and state agencies in the Rocky Mountain region were asked in late spring 2003 to form a Rocky Mountain Energy Council (RMEC). The goal of the council is to streamline energy development in Wyoming, Montana, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. The National Park Service is participating in the RMEC process, although there are no proposals yet for active energy development sites within park units. Park managers are participating in the process to draw attention to their concerns about possible impacts on park resources in these states. Staff from the NPS Intermountain Support Office (Divisions of Natural Resources Research and Technology, and Ranger Activities) and the Natural Resource Program Center (Air, Water, and Geologic Resources Divisions) are involved and available for assistance as the process continues.

In January 2003 the National Park Service also held its first Western Energy Summit, in Phoenix, Arizona. The summit was created to give park resource managers and superintendents the background information they need to constructively and effectively influence decisions affecting energy development on federal lands adjacent to parks and to advance sound energy-use strategies within park boundaries. The gathering included not only NPS staff but also key representatives from other federal and state agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Environmental Compliance, Bonneville Power Administration, Western Governor's Association, National Renewable Energy Laboratory, and University of Denver. Rebecca Watson, assistant secretary for land and minerals management, opened the conference with a presentation on the National Energy Policy and its implications for the western United States. More detailed information about the Western Energy Summit, including handouts, maps, and fact sheets, is available on the NPS intranet at www2.nrintra.nps.gov/energysummit.

Park managers can no longer protect the natural resources of our nation's parks without paying attention to, being informed of, and becoming actively involved in activities like energy development that are happening outside park boundaries. Increasingly the National Park Service will need to focus on the big picture of energy development to be effective stewards. ■

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- NPS Units
- National Trails
- Oil Production
- Gas Production

