

Proposed Action and Purpose & Need for Surface Management of Gas Leasing and Development

Jicarilla Ranger District, Carson National Forest

Introduction

In many parts of the United States, National Forest System lands overlie geological formations that contain oil and/or natural gas. "Leases" are issued under the mineral leasing laws on many lands for the purpose of drilling exploratory and production wells and extracting oil and/or gas. The mission of the Forest Service in relation to minerals management is to support, facilitate, and administer the orderly exploration, development, and production of mineral and energy resources on National Forest System lands to help meet the present and future needs of the Nation (Mining and Minerals Policy Act [1970] and Forest Service Manual (FSM 2802)).

It is important to recognize the variation in the Forest Supervisor's decision space as it relates to new leases and existing leases based on the legislation policy. For new leases, the decision will address whether lands that are available for leasing will be authorized for leasing. If the Forest Supervisor decision is to authorize these lands for lease, stipulations that would accompany any new leases would be determined. The Bureau of Land Management would then be responsible for determining whether to actually lease or not lease the available lands. For existing leases (which applies to 98% or 150,554 acres of the Jicarilla Ranger District), any new conditions must be consistent with the existing lease rights, applicable laws, and regulations.

Any stipulations intended to mitigate effects on surface resources, beyond that required by the standard lease terms, must be attached to the lease at the time it is issued. Consequently, although existing lessees may be willing to voluntarily make changes, the leases they currently hold do not require them to do so.

Purpose and Scope of Document

The Environmental Impact Statement being prepared will address the effects of developing oil & gas within the Project Area. It will disclose built-in environmental protection measures, commonly referred to as Best Management Practices, that are applicable to all alternatives. It also proposes Forest Plan level standards and guidelines that apply to all or portions of the project area and to oil & gas development overall. **The overall objective is to help provide direction in regards to oil & gas development to reduce impacts to other surface resources while recognizing mineral rights and the Federal responsibility in the application of these rights.**

Further site-specific environmental protection measures designed to control the impacts of the project may be applied at the project level through future Applications for Permit to Drill and Surface Use Plans of Operations. When submitted, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review of each of these future permits will be tiered to

this EIS. The review will be limited in scope in each case to the site-specific aspects of the environmental analysis that was not covered by this EIS.

This analysis will address what standards and guidelines within the current Land Management Plan need to be modified or amended to allow reasonable access to existing mineral rights and what additional desired resource conditions need to be established to protect other surface resource values. This analysis is being conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) to identify and assess potentially significant environmental impacts and address issues associated with leasing.

Current Status of Analysis

Much effort has already occurred in regards to this planning effort. In September 2003 a Draft Environmental Impact Statement was issued. Over 1,200 comments were received on the initial Draft Environment Impact Statement. The Draft Environment Impact Statement was later withdrawn and parts of the planning process will be completed again. Comments received during the previous effort have helped shape the new purpose & need and proposed action. Previous comments that are still relevant to the proposed action will be used to help define new issues.

Public comments are welcome on the new proposed action and purpose & need. The scoping process will help define the significant issues to be analyzed in detail and that will help in the development of alternatives to the proposed action. This public comment period will be 30 days following the publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register.

Your review and comments will help us identify any issues generated by the proposed action and aid us in the development of alternatives to be analyzed. We emphasize that the Forest Service has developed this proposed action to meet a purpose and need with the best information available. The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Surface Management of the Natural Gas Resource Development on the Jicarilla Ranger District will analyze the effects on watersheds, vegetation, wildlife, threatened and endangered plants and animals, riparian areas, soils, air and water quality, reaching gas resources, social and economic conditions, recreation, heritage resources, noise and other concerns that may arise from your response to this report.

***Address all comments concerning this project to the Carson National Forest,
ATTN: Jicarilla Gas Development EIS, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, NM 87571.
E-mail comments may be sent to comments-southwestern-carson@fs.fed.us.***