

Oral testimony given by Stephen B. Smith, Mayor of Pinedale, Wyoming to the House Committee on Natural Resources on HR 3534 on Thursday September 17, 2009

(Contains some differences from the submitted written testimony)  
Transcribed by Pinedale Online from audio of the hearing

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Stephen Smith and I serve as the mayor of Pinedale a small town of about 1,600 people in the upper Green River Valley in western Wyoming. Pinedale is the county seat of Sublette County, population around 7,500, and nearly half of the county's residents live within 5 miles of our town.

In a county larger than the state Connecticut, 80% of our lands are federally managed. We are also home to one of the largest natural gas fields in the United States.

I come before you not as an expert on energy policy, or an advocate for or against the energy industry. I am here to speak to the concerns and challenges that we as a community have experienced over the past few years and to share my opinions on this proposed legislation.

Natural gas exploration and production in Sublette County has changed the dynamics of our community over the past few years. We are traditionally a community rooted in agriculture and in tourism. The natural gas fields around Pinedale are not a recent discovery and were known to hold great reserves. But only a few years ago did technology become available to successfully extract this resource and Pinedale changed overnight.

The development of the gas fields has been of significant economic benefit to our community. It has also brought challenges.

One of our greatest concerns in light of energy development has been the socio-economic impacts of a rapidly increased population. These include the need for local governments to provide new and updated infrastructure, build new medical clinics, support childcare facilities, as well as addressing increases in crime, traffic, and calls for emergency services.

Even more important than socio-economic issues are our citizens' concerns over real and potential health hazards. Over the past three years we have had

numerous ozone alerts in our county, the first ever, with ozone levels exceeding maximums established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Air quality in the valley, and especially in the class one air shed of the Bridger Wilderness, is declining and needs to be addressed.

Local citizens have rallied around these issues and have taken their concerns to both state and federal agencies. The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality has been active in monitoring air quality and ozone and although their efforts are ongoing, we have seen no relief for the situation. Similar concerns have been raised over water quality and the potential of contaminated wells from chemicals used in the drilling process.

Because of the large amount of federal ownership in Sublette County, House Resolution 3534 would certainly affect the future of development in our area. There are certain portions of this proposed legislation on which I would like to comment, the first being Title 3 Section 306 Best Management Practices.

In my opinion, the use of best available technologies should be required for all energy development on federal lands. Industry in our area is currently moving in that direction, using some natural gas burning engines for drilling, and introducing a liquid gathering system on the Pinedale anticline. These are two examples of voluntary and proactive steps taken by some operators and we are hopeful that this trend might continue. Requiring these practices ensures the most current technology continues to be implemented and used in both exploration and development.

Secondly, HR3534 addresses the elimination of categorical exclusions. From October 2006 through May of 2009 over 1500 applications to drill were approved with the use of these categorical exclusions out of the Pinedale BLM field office alone. Use of this magnitude circumvents proper analysis of large field development and goes against the intentions of NEPA.

This legislation does not however address the issue of social and economic concerns, their identification and mitigation. The town and the county have had extensive conversations with the BLM, the Governor's office and our Congressional delegation on this subject in hopes of alleviating some of the impacts our community has endured. In the future, socio-economic matters should be considered and mitigated at all stages of planning and development in the same manner as physical and environmental impacts.

I understand the need for energy development and its economic benefit not only to the town of Pinedale but to our nation as a whole. On the other hand, I also understand the social and economic impacts it has had on the citizens of my community and surrounding areas

I therefore thank you for taking the time to hear the concerns of a small community and possibly addressing them in this bill.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.