ND Makes List of Sites Threatened by Oil Drilling

JAMES MacPHERSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Roadless tracts of grasslands, numerous parks, wildlife areas and North Dakota's highest peak at White Butte are among 40 sites in the western part of the state that have been nominated for increased protection from oil drilling.

The list was compiled by the state Industrial Commission with input from the public, environmental groups and government agencies over the past two years, said Karlene Fine, the commission's director.

Gov. Jack Dalrymple is chairman of the commission, which regulates North Dakota's oil and gas industry. Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem and Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring are its other members.

The men — all Republicans — are slated to visit most of the sites in western North Dakota's oil patch over the next several weeks.

Jeff Zent, a spokesman for Dalrymple, said scheduling conflicts prohibit the panel from traveling together.

Dalrymple was slated to begin his tour Thursday to see areas identified as having historical, cultural and recreational significance, as well as areas that support unique wildlife and plant habitat, Zent said.

"The governor will be going out west. He already has seen a lot of western North Dakota but he does want to go back out there to look at some specific sites," Zent said. "It may work out best in the long run to have the commissioners go out individually because they may be able to cover more ground."

Many of the sites identified on the list are on state or federal land and several of those are intermingled with private land, Fine said.

Wayde Schafer, a North Dakota spokesman for the Sierra Club, said the mixed bag of land ownership creates a "patchwork of problems" for conservation groups and regulators.

"It's not clear what level of protection the Industrial Commission has for these sites," Schafer said. "Each of these sites will have to have their own set of solutions to protect their historic or ecological significance."

Further complicating oversight of culturally or environmentally sensitive areas is that a tract of land in North Dakota can have separate owners, above and below ground. Surface owners are typically trumped by mineral owners who are allowed to access the land for exploration under state law.

"Mineralowners in this state can develop their minerals," said Goehring, of the Industrial Commission. "We just have to address concerns and minimize those impacts."

Goehring said some examples include requiring companies to build roads or place wells in the least intrusive areas possible, or even requiring companies to paint tanks and other equipment so that it blends with the landscape.

Stenehjem said he often vacations in western North Dakota and has done so as late as last weekend. He already has visited many of the identified sites and intends to look at more of them in the coming weeks.

Of particular concern, he said, is the issue of natural gas flaring in western North Dakota, where about 30 percent of the state's gas production is being burned off or "flared" because development of the pipelines and processing facilities needed to handle it has not kept pace with production.

"We've done a lot but we need to do more," Stenehjem said.

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