

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Land Management

[WY-060-01-1320-01; WYW127221]

Notice of Availability of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the North Rochelle Coal Lease Application Located in Northeastern Wyoming's Powder River Basin

AGENCY: Bureau of Land Management, Interior.

SUMMARY: This notice announces the availability of a final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) pursuant to 40 CFR 1500-1508 for the North Rochelle Coal Lease Application (WYW127221) in the Wyoming Powder River Basin. The North Rochelle tract (originally called the North Roundup tract) is being considered for sale as a result of a maintenance coal lease application filed by Bluegrass Coal Development Company (formerly SMC Mining Company) for Federal coal located adjacent to the North Rochelle Mine in Campbell County, Wyoming. The FEIS evaluates the impacts of holding a competitive coal lease sale and issuing a lease if there is a successful bidder. The North Rochelle Mine is a producing coal mine, which has met Federal diligent development requirements on its existing Federal lease. There are currently no mining or rail facilities at the mine, which is located approximately 50 miles south of Gillette, Wyoming.

DATES: The FEIS is scheduled to be available to the public on April 11, 1997. In order to assure that comments are considered in the Record of Decision, they should be received no later than close of business on May 12, 1997.

ADDRESSES: Comments, concerns, and requests for copies of the FEIS (or an Executive Summary of the FEIS) should be addressed to Casper District Office, Bureau of Land Management, Attn: Nancy Doelger, 1701 East "E" Street, Casper, Wyoming 82601. Comments can also be faxed to 307-234-1525, Attn: Nancy Doelger.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Nancy Doelger or Mike Karbs, at 307-261-7600, or contact the fax or address listed above.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This coal lease application was made to the BLM pursuant to provisions of 43 CFR 3425.1 as a lease by application. On July 22, 1992, Bluegrass Coal Development Company (formerly SMC Mining Company) applied for a coal lease for approximately 1,439 acres (approximately 144 million tons of coal) in an area adjacent to the North Rochelle Mine in Campbell County, Wyoming. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has recommended that approximately 81 additional acres containing approximately 9 million tons of coal be included in the tract to avoid a potential bypass situation in the future, and that approximately 39 acres containing approximately 4 million tons of coal be excluded from the tract to enhance the value of the remaining unleased coal in the area. The application was for the following lands:

T. 42 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 4: Lots 5 thru 16, 19, and 20;
Sec. 5: Lots 5 thru 16;
Sec. 9: Lot 1;

T. 43 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 32: Lots 9 thru 11, 14 thru 16;
Sec. 33: Lots 11 thru 14;

Containing 1439.92 acres, more or less.

The BLM has recommended that the following lands containing approximately 4 million tons of coal reserves be excluded from the application:

T. 42 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 9: Lot 1;

Containing 39.15 acres, more or less.

The BLM has recommended that the following additional lands containing an additional estimated 9 million tons of coal reserves be included in the application:

T. 43 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 32: Lots 12 and 13.

Containing 81.16 acres, more or less.

The tract as amended by the BLM contains a total of approximately 1481.93 acres and approximately 149 million tons of coal reserves, and includes the following lands:

T. 42 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 4: Lots 5 thru 16, 19, and 20;
Sec. 5: Lots 5 thru 16;

T. 43 N., R. 70 W., 6th P.M., Wyoming

Sec. 32: Lots 9 thru 16;
Sec. 33: Lots 11 thru 14;

The lease application area is west of and contiguous with Bluegrass' existing North Rochelle Mine and with Thunder Basin Coal Company's Black Thunder Mine. The North Rochelle Mine began producing coal in 1990 from a Federal

lease (WYW71692) issued in 1982. Coal production from the existing Federal lease met the diligence requirements of Section 2(a)(2)(A) of the Mineral Leasing Act in November 1996. Bluegrass has applied to lease the proposed North Rochelle Tract (initially called the North Roundup Tract) as a maintenance tract for the North Rochelle Mine.

There are no existing mine facilities or rail facilities at the North Rochelle Mine. Construction is scheduled to begin on the North Rochelle rail and mine facilities in mid-1997. In addition, Encoal Corporation is proposing to begin construction of a coal enhancement facility and power plant inside the rail loop at the North Rochelle Mine starting in 1997, and North American Power Group of Englewood, Colorado is proposing to construct a power plant near the adjacent Black Thunder Mine, starting in late 1997.

The FEIS analyzes three alternatives. The proposed action is to lease the tract as applied for to the successful bidder. Alternative A is to lease the tract as modified by the BLM to the successful bidder. This is the Preferred Alternative of the BLM. The third alternative is the No Action Alternative, which assumes that the lease is not issued.

The North Rochelle tract would be logically mined as a maintenance lease by either the existing North Rochelle Mine or the existing Black Thunder Mine, but it does not include enough coal to make opening a new mine economical. The North Rochelle tract includes part of the Roundup tract, a Federal coal tract which was delineated in the early 1980s but which was never offered for sale.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is a cooperating agency in the preparation of the FEIS because the surface of some of the lands included in the tract is owned by the Federal Government and administered by the USFS as part of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement is also a cooperating agency in the preparation of the FEIS, because it is the Federal agency that administers surface coal mining operations under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement was made available to the public on November 8, 1996, and the comment period extended through January 10, 1997. Eleven written comment letters were received on the draft documents. They are included, with responses, as Appendix G of the FEIS.

A public hearing was held at 7 p.m. on December 12, 1997, at the Holiday

Inn, 2009 S. Douglas Highway, Gillette, Wyoming. The purpose of the hearing was to receive comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and on the fair market value, the maximum economic recovery, and the proposed competitive sale of coal from the North Rochelle tract (originally called the North Roundup tract). An open house was held prior to the hearing from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. on December 12, 1996, at the Gillette Holiday Inn to answer questions about the North Rochelle coal lease application, as well as other pending coal lease applications, other mineral development issues in the Powder River Basin, the coal leasing process, and the coal unsuitability screening process.

Dated: April 3, 1997.

Alan R. Pierson,

State Director.

[FR Doc. 97-9163 Filed 4-9-97; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4310-22-P