

Bald eagles suspend Rifle-area drilling

Energy company Antero halts activities seasonally for the birds

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RIFLE — A natural gas company that has been working to minimize impacts on people while drilling between Rifle and Silt is extending similar consideration to a bird, too.

Denver-based Antero Resources Corp. has been voluntarily restricting drilling operations along the Colorado River near a bald eagle's nest during the eagles' nesting and eaglet-rearing activities.

"We have imposed seasonal wildlife restrictions on ourselves," Robert Mueller, vice president of geology for Antero, said Tuesday at a meeting in Rifle.

The company reported that it has drilled about 100 producing wells in the Silt-to-Rifle area and plans to drill about 72 more this year, including near the nest site. Mueller said Antero is restricting activities within a half mile of the site during nest preparation in late fall and through the spring when eggs are laid and eaglets are in the nest.

"Perfect. We recommend a quarter mile [buffer]," Colorado Division of Wildlife spokesman Randy Hampton said Wednesday, upon hearing of Mueller's comments.

Mueller said that after a landowner made Antero aware of the eagles' presence, the company hired a biologist to monitor them and consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and DOW. It also has paid for raptor studies to be conducted along the river corridor in its operations area.

Antero didn't have to consult with the DOW about the eagles because its operations are on private land.

"We certainly appreciate when industry considers wildlife and takes a voluntary approach to protecting it on private land," Hampton said.

Two eaglets (only one is visible) sit in a nest in a tree near Rifle along the Colorado River in 2005. Antero Resources is voluntarily restricting drilling activities near this eagle nesting site at certain times of the year. (Kelley Cox/Post Independent file)



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Eagles have been making a comeback in Garfield County, just as elsewhere in Colorado and across the nation. Before 2004, eaglets hadn't been born in the county since 1973, and prior to that, the last local eaglets were seen in 1954. However, beginning in 2004, pairs of eagles began rearing young on the Roaring Fork River north of Carbondale and at the Rifle-area site.

Mueller pointed out that the site is near gravel pit operations, and also within earshot of Interstate 70, railroad tracks and the Garfield County Airport.

Hampton said wildlife often feels less threatened by people in vehicles than by people who are on foot, and historic habitat is important to eagles.

"If they've been there before, they're likely to return," he said.

Antero met with residents living in the Silt and Rifle areas this week as part of its voluntary community development plan, which is aimed at minimizing drilling impacts on residents and keeping them informed of its plans. The plan was developed in recent years after Antero began leasing property between New Castle and Rifle, including land north of the river that long had been considered an unlikely place to drill.

Up to now, Antero has focused its drilling activities just south of Silt and along the Colorado River/Interstate 70 corridor heading toward Rifle. However, company officials said that this year they plan to drill four wells north of Highway 6 — Antero's first wells north of the highway. The wells would be drilled east of Rifle.

The 72 total wells Antero plans for this year would be drilled directionally from existing well pads and from seven new pads.

Company officials said Tuesday they hope to install pipelines to reduce the use of trucks to haul water required in the drilling process; are willing to look into ways of reducing lighting and noise at drill rig sites; have been conducting air quality and water well testing; and will continue to investigate odors that are brought to their attention.