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BILLINGS – The Bureau of Land Management will rewrite an environmental assessment to improve the impact analysis of 85 federal coal bed natural gas wells near Decker.

In a decision signed today, BLM Montana State Director Marty Ott remanded the environmental document to the agency's Miles City Field Office. The decision also included a stay halting all operations connected with the gas wells in question.

Fidelity Exploration and Production Co. applied for drilling permits for the 85 wells last June. After completing an environmental assessment on the proposal, BLM approved the drilling permits on September 16. In mid-October, four groups requested a State Director Review of the decision, and that review led to today's remand decision and stay order.

“Overall, the original environmental assessment is sound,” said Ott. “But our review found some areas of the document where we could improve our analysis and areas where we could expand the disclosure of potential impacts we had analyzed.”

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“A remand order is never an easy one to give, but in this case it is the right thing to do. We take our responsibility to strike the right balance between responsible energy development and stewardship of other resources very seriously. We want to make sure our decisions are based on the best science we can reasonably assemble.”

“Work on the new environmental assessment will begin immediately, and we hope to have the rewrite completed before the end of January.”

The groups requesting the review were the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Native Action, Northern Plains Resource Council, and the Western Environmental Law Center, which is representing the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, American Lands Alliance, and George Wuerthner. A copy of the complete remand decision has been mailed to them, and it is also available at BLM offices in Billings and Miles City, or on the web at www.mt.blm.gov