Lessons for Oak Mesa

*Photo Documentation of Coal Exploration Above the Elk Creek Coal Mine*

Gunnison County, Colorado

Elk Creek Coal Mine, Somerset, Colorado

Prepared by Jeremy Nichols,
Climate and Energy Program Director
for WildEarth Guardians

October 21, 2011
Introduction

The Elk Creek Coal Mine in Colorado’s North Fork of the Gunnison River Valley is the second largest coal mine in the state. Using underground, longwall mining techniques, the mine produced 5.7 million tons of coal in 2009. The mine is the 33rd largest coal mine in the United States. See Coal Production Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, http://www.eia.gov/cneaf/coal/page/acr/table9.html. Coal from the mine is burned in around 17 power plants in the United States, including two in Colorado.

Oxbow Mining, a privately held corporation, owns the Elk Creek Coal Mine. Oxbow is now developing plans for a new coal mine in a nearby area called Oak Mesa, which is located due west of the Elk Creek Coal Mine in neighboring Delta County, Colorado.

As part of this effort, the company submitted on May 6, 2011 a plan to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to explore the coal reserves of Oak Mesa. Because the coal is owned by the federal government, Oxbow will need BLM approval of its exploration plan. Ultimately, if the company is to open a new coal mine, it must receive approval from the BLM to lease the coal.

The Oak Mesa exploration area includes 13,873 acres, of which 67.8% are privately owned and 32.2% are owned by the BLM. Oxbow’s proposal would involve drilling holes into the ground in order to obtain geologic samples of the underlying coal. Oxbow’s application states, “Coal exploration drilling is needed to determine seam reserve availability for possible development of a new underground coal mine[.]” Oxbow, Federal Coal Exploration License Plan for the Oak Mesa Area within Delta County, Colorado, Exploration License No. COC-74911, http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/co/information/nepa/uncompahgre_field/ufo_nepa_documents0.Par.73185.File.dat/11-36%20Oak%20Mesa%20Exploration%20License%20revised%202011-0908.pdf.

If approved by the BLM, Oxbow would drill 43 exploration holes. All of the holes, except one, would be drilled on privately owned lands. Drilling will require road construction and reconstruction, the movement and use of a drilling rig, supporting equipment, and drilling crews. For each drill hole, a pad of approximately 0.5 acres in size may be constructed. Holes will be drilled using an 8 3/4 inch rotary hole to depths of up to 2,245 feet. Oxbow has indicated that a total of 35.74 acres will be disturbed and 7.86 miles of new road will be constructed.

Maps showing the Oak Mesa exploration area are presented on the following pages. The first map shows the location of proposed drill holes, proposed roads, and surface ownership, and was prepared by Oxbow. The second is a Google Earth image of the exploration area prepared by WildEarth Guardians.
The Impacts of Exploration--A Lesson from Elk Creek

As evidenced by activities at Oxbow’s Elk Creek Coal Mine, the surface impacts of coal exploration in the Oak Mesa area are likely to be significant. The pictures below show drilling, pad construction, and road construction above in an area above the Elk Creek Mine. These pictures provide just a small glimpse of the impacts of exploration.

Drilling pad above and active exploration drilling below. These pictures were taken by Oxbow and obtained from the BLM. The pictures were taken in August of 2008.
Even after exploration was completed, the impacts persisted on the landscape. Below are pictures of the same exploration activity taken in June of 2009 showing an exploration well pad and abandoned drill hole.
Below is the same well pad. Nearly one year later, the pad is still devoid of vegetation and part of it has turned into a water pit. Photos taken June 2009.
The impacts of road construction persisted. The pictures below show a road constructed for the exploration. Although the road was closed and debris strewn upon it, the impacts continued and were obvious. Photos taken June 2009.
The Effectiveness of Reclamation--More Lessons from Elk Creek

Although Oxbow and the BLM have asserted that any exploration impacts will be fully reclaimed, the impacts of coal exploration above Oxbow’s Elk Creek Coal Mine tell a different story. More than three years after exploration, the well pads and roads are still very obvious on the landscape and seem far from reclamation. The pictures below were all taken in August of 2011.

The well pad above is considered by Oxbow to be reclaimed. However, while the pad was cut into oak scrub, oak has not been reestablished on the site. Furthermore, the site appeared to be dominated by weeds, including nonnative grasses. Boulders and broken branches were strewn across the pad.
The photo above shows the same well pad. Below is a road cut through oak scrub. Although some grasses are growing in the road, the road bed is still an obvious impact and no oak is being reestablished. Photos taken August 2011.
The pictures below show two more well pads. There is less bare dirt, but vegetation has not returned to pre-impact conditions. Furthermore, weeds like thistles, and cheat grass appeared abundant in much of the disturbed area. Photos taken August 2011.
Another road that remains obvious on the landscape. Although boulders have been strewn on the road, it has not been fully reclaimed. Oak has not been restored and weeds are abundant in the disturbed road bed. Photos taken August 2011.
Learning Lessons in Oak Mesa

The coal exploration that has occurred above the Elk Creek Coal Mine is now potentially going to happen in the Oak Mesa area. If approved by the BLM, Oxbow’s exploration plan is likely to lead to significant scars on the landscape. Despite promises of reclamation, it seems unlikely that full reclamation will occur after exploration concludes. With 43 wells, more than 7 miles of new roads, and other associated impacts, the effects of exploration could be observed for many years.

Below are pictures of BLM lands within the Oak Mesa area taken in August of 2011 that will be impacted by exploration. The proposed drill holes, well pads, and roads will affect acres of oak, streams in the area, and scenic hills and cliffs in the area. Based on the lessons learned at Elk Creek, exploration will leave a lasting impact in this undeveloped country, particularly on private lands within the area.
Views of Oak Mesa coal exploration area, including hillsides and nearby West Elk Mountains to the south. Photos taken August 2011.
Roatcap Creek below and hills covered with oak on BLM lands in the Oak Mesa area. Photos taken August 2011.