

Initiative seeks to protect GJ watershed

by Matt Sura, WCC Energy Organizer

In mid-July, the Concerned Citizens' Alliance, the Mesa County chapter of the Western Colorado Congress, kicked off its effort to gather signatures to place a Grand Junction watershed ordinance on the November ballot. The ordinance would attach additional water quality protection requirements to activities within the Grand Junction watershed that are considered "high risk" for the City's water supply.

High risk activities include oil and gas drilling, timber sales and feed lot operations.

"This is a common-sense initiative," stated Peggy Rawlins of Grand Junction at a press event outside of the Grand Junction City Hall. "In a desert, water is our most precious natural resource."

PROTEST OF LEASES REMAINS UNANSWERED

On February 9, the BLM leased 13,000 acres for oil and gas development within Palisade's and Grand Junction's designated watersheds on the west side of the Grand Mesa Slopes.

The leases were protested by the City of Grand Junction, the Town of Palisade, and Western Colorado Congress. U.S. Senator Ken Salazar and U.S. Representative John Salazar have also been vocal opponents of the BLM

leases. The BLM has not ruled on the protests.

CCA members are not waiting to hear what the BLM decides to do. "The current administration has made oil and gas drilling a higher priority than any other use," said Bill Grant, a CCA member from Grand Junction. "Fortunately, Colorado law allows municipalities to protect their drinking water supplies. If the federal government won't protect our water, we will have to do it ourselves," Grant added.

ORDINANCE DOES NOT BAN DRILLING ACTIVITIES

The proposed ordinance does not prohibit drilling or other industrial activities but gives the City expanded powers to require additional water quality protections. The City would be able to require a bond to cover 100% of the potential clean-up costs, hire additional staff paid by the industry to monitor the activity, and require water testing and additional reporting.

Oil and gas operations require an average of seven acres of ground disturbance per gas well. This includes building a road to access the site, leveling a well pad, and connecting pipelines to the well. This ground disturbance can lead to increased sediment (mud) in the stream. Timber sales can also degrade

water quality by increasing soil erosion.

AN INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY WITH INDUSTRIAL CHEMICALS

Hydraulic fracturing ("fracing") injects from 50,000 to 350,000 gallons of highly pressurized drilling fluids into each well to crack open gas-producing formations in the tight sands and rock. Toxic chemicals, including diesel fuel, are often used in the fracing process.

Only a portion of the mixture is recovered and stored in open waste pits for reuse or until it evaporates or is hauled away. The rest remains underground where there is a potential for it to leach or migrate into aquifers and streams.

Over the past two years there have been several accidents, toxic spills, underground and surface water contamination, explosions and fires that have resulted from gas drilling in our region.

Since 2002 the industry has self-reported over 1,000 accidental spills in Colorado. Of those, 183 spills have resulted in contamination of surface or ground water.* Many spills go unreported.

Rawlins moved from Parachute to Grand Junction to escape the heavy gas drilling activity in Garfield County. "Accidents happen all the time in Garfield County. It only takes one accident to jeopardize

the drinking water for the largest city on the Western Slope," Rawlins said.

CONTAMINATION REACHES DRINKING WATER WELLS

Dozens of water wells in Colorado have been contaminated by drilling processes. In Garfield County there have been some recent examples: The Goad well (blew up in 2000 – near Rifle); the Dietrich well (contaminated by explosive levels of gas – near Silt); the Amos well (gray water followed by family illness thought to be from toxic drilling fluids in water – near Silt); and the infamous Divide Creek Seep (methane gas bubbling up into creek for three years now – near Silt)*.

"Oil and gas companies have access to many areas where drilling is appropriate and reasonably safe, but these do not include the Grand Junction and Palisade watersheds," said Grant. "We encourage the citizens of Grand Junction to join our effort to protect our water quality."

**(Source: Colorado Oil and Gas Commission - <http://oil-gas.state.co.us/>)*