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Utes have become a major player

Tribe seeks to unlock methane mysteries, harness seeping gas

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Photo by Matt McClain © The Rocky Mountain News

Jonathan Begay works on a monitoring well on the Southern Ute Indian Reservation in La Plata County. Ute officials are considering converting 12 such wells into production wells and selling the captured gas to heat homes.

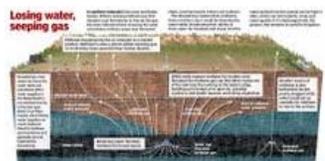


Photo by Graphic by Michael Hall
Losing water, seeping gas

Along a ridge south of Soda Springs on the Southern Ute Reservation, a coal-bed fire burns beneath the surface, hot enough to melt the soles of tennis shoes and to register over 1,000 degrees on high-tech thermometers.

Environmental engineers walk among gray patches of concrete that have been poured into crevices and holes as part of the millions of dollars the tribe has spent to study, remediate and extinguish the fire that has burned for decades.

Lower down the ridge, a series of about a dozen wells stretching several miles through the juniper-dotted landscape vent methane gas into the air. Soon, the gas may be harnessed and sold to heat homes in California.

The Southern Ute Indian Tribe is methodically unraveling the mystery of the coal-bed methane gas seeps that has so far eluded government and energy company officials in La Plata County.

"The seeps had been there forever," said Bob Zahradnik, operating director of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe Growth Fund. "Our concern was (that we might be) accelerating them because of coal methane gas production, and that's why we've been watching it."

The Southern Ute tribe has been a major player in the gas development business since the early 1990s. Their reservation sits on a large pool of coal-bed methane gas in the San Juan Basin.

Between 1949 and 1951, the Bureau of Indian Affairs leased most of the rights to the gas to energy companies, leaving the tribe with little in royalties. But in 1993, after new technology emerged to extract the gas from coal, the tribe began buying back leases and now controls 20 percent of the wells on the reservation.

Since then, its geologists and consultants have developed the most complete picture so far of the impact of gas exploration on the San Juan Basin.

"We have to look at this regionally, whereas operators just look at their acreage," Zahradnik said.

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Now, the tribe has set its sights on addressing two environmental problems involving coal beds and the methane gas associated with them.

Gas seeps at the edge of the basin can cause explosions. Tribal officials also have found two large seeps near old coal mines. After analyzing well logs, they believe that increased drilling since the '90s has exacerbated the seeps, Zahradnik said.

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In addition, the gas is a contributor to global warming, up to 20 times more damaging than carbon dioxide.

To harness the gas before it seeps from the ground, Zahradnik and other tribal officials will propose to tribal leaders that they convert 12 shallow monitoring wells into production wells. Instead of venting the gas into the atmosphere, the wells would capture it, after which it would be processed and sold in California.

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If the plan is approved, the system could be in place by the middle of next year, Zahradnik said.

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Government and energy company officials are closely following the tribe's progress in hopes that a similar system can be used to mitigate seeps in the rest of La Plata County.

Since the 1990s, seeps have led one energy company, Amoco, to buy and raze at least a half-dozen homes and prompted the county to put up signs near seeps warning residents of the noxious gas being emitted.

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"That is one of the mitigation techniques that we, north of the Ute line, are watching, absolutely," said Christi Zeller, director

of the La Plata County Energy Council. "We shall see if their idea works."

Then there is the lingering underground coal fire south of Soda Springs on the southwest part of the reservation, which probably has burned for decades if not longer, Zahradnik said.

Again, the tribe is concerned whether drilling has drawn down the water table, exposing more of the coal to oxygen and thus combustion, he said.

Coal fires have characterized the area for centuries. The mountains overlooking the fire are called Cinder Buttes, named after the fires that helped form the sharp ridges.

The tribe has been trying to extinguish the fire since the mid-1990s, slowing it by pouring special high-temperature concrete into the crevices on the surface.

Zahradnik said the tribe nixed the idea of getting rid of the fire by allowing the coal to be mined.

"The tribe decided the fires had much less environmental impact than a massive strip mine."

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