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Natural Resources Law Center Press Releases

January 30, 2002

NRLC Awarded Funds to Study Coal-bed Methane Energy

The Natural Resources Law Center (NRLC) at the University of Colorado Law School has received a grant in the amount of \$180,000 from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to research an energy resource of particular importance to the West: coal-bed methane (CBM). According to project director Gary Bryner, CBM is “an issue that has received insufficient attention by academics, activists, media, and industry. The tremendous increase in development of CBM poses huge challenges to local communities and ecosystems.” Coal-bed methane is a form of natural gas that is trapped within coal seams and can be extracted by drilling wells that release large quantities of good to very poor quality water. CBM wells in the Interior West, particularly Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming, are rapidly becoming a major source of natural gas. Because coal-bed methane exploration already is occurring in large areas of the country, the research project is designed to provide accurate information quickly--within six months. Says Bryner, “The publication of the Bush administration’s national energy policy, the legislation currently before Congress, and the importance of energy in the American economy and the consequences for foreign policy of our reliance on imported oil all raise difficult policy questions that have profound implications for the American West.” Bryner and his associates will frame the issues surrounding CBM development--history, locations, the Bush administration’s energy plan, proposed congressional legislation, private lands issues, and impacts on communities from noise, water pollution, and other effects of development. Environmental assessment, particularly the impact of CBM extraction on water quality and quantity, air quality and wildlife will come under scrutiny. The study will focus on alternatives for minimizing the environmental, equity, and other impacts and will offer recommendations regarding reducing those impacts and promoting reclamation at the federal, state, and local levels. “In concluding our report, we’ll look at “next steps,” says Bryner. “We’ll examine the information gaps that affect making rational decisions, find entities that could fill those gaps, and determine the value in identifying or developing a consensus view for the Intermountain West.”

On April 4 and 5, at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, the Center will sponsor a forum for diverse points of view to address the role of CBM in meeting America’s energy policy challenges.