

Interview with Prill Mecham by Leslie Waggener for the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center's oral history program Wyoming's Energy Boom, 1995-2010, Accession # 11749, October 13, 2010.

LESLIE WAGGENER: Leslie Waggener is interviewing Prill Mecham, Field Manager of the Bureau of Land Management's Pinedale, Wyoming office from 2000 until her retirement in 2006. The interview is being conducted in Prill's home in Pinedale, on October 13, 2010. The interview is for the project, Wyoming's Recent Energy Boom, 1995-2010, an Oral History Program.

I just want to start out, Prill, by asking where you're from.

PRILL MECHAM: Well, I'm from, actually, Niagara Falls, New York. I was born there and raised in western New York near there until I went to college in—when I was seventeen years old, and I went to school in Troy, New York, and eventually got my degree in Albany, New York, from the State University of New York at Albany.

LW: And what were your intentions when you went to school? What did you major in?

PM: Oh, I majored in a lot of different things. [Laughs] I started out as a home ec major and then I switched to history, and finally ended up as a major in anthropology with an emphasis on North American archeology.

LW: And when did you start work with the BLM?

PM: I started work with BLM in 1978. I got my first job in Meeker, Colorado with BLM as an archeologist and worked there for five years.

LW: And then did you come here next, to the Pinedale office?

PM: No, after my job with Meeker, which also incidentally was in a previous energy boom cycle and Meeker was one of those places that was experiencing a big oil and gas boom, mostly natural gas, as well.

I went from there to Kremmling, Colorado, which had little to no energy activity, but I became what they called at that time multi-resource staff leader, which was a supervisor for the natural resources staff. I supervised wildlife biologists and hydrologists; I supervised the archeologist and foresters. They had a pretty good size forestry staff. So that's what I did there.

Then in, I think it was 1988, ten years after I started my career, I went—we, my husband and I, moved to Reno, Nevada, and I actually left the BLM because he was wanting to start his own contracting business and I was going through some personal things at the time and so I just needed a break. So I left and we moved to Reno and then in, I think it was 1991, early '91, I got back into the BLM and took a job as the district archeologist for the Carson City District in Reno and I was there until 1998 when I accepted the assistant field manager position in Pinedale.

LW: Well, and just to go back, you're right. Meeker, big energy boom area in the late '70s when the energy boom also hit here in Wyoming.

PM: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Exactly.

LW: What were you seeing at that time in Meeker as an archeologist? Or just in general?

PM: Same situation. Almost identical to what happened in Pinedale this last round and that was that the price of houses had gone through the roof. People had a hard time, including my husband and I—we had a hard time finding a house that we could afford to buy and that was even available. There were virtually no rentals in town at all, and so we really had to scramble. We weren't real ready to buy a house because we were both new to the house market but we finally found a little house that worked for us and the whole thing was interesting because by—the boom started around I think '97 there and we got there in—I mean, not '97, excuse me.

LW: '77?

PM: '77. We got there in '78 and by '83 it was over, so it basically lasted a little more than five years. So it was very, very similar. Same situation with a lot of money flooding into town. It was a very small ranching community. I would say even less cosmopolitan than Pinedale. Very—very—

LW: Almost like Big Piney, maybe?

PM: Well, even more sheltered than that. That part of Rio Blanco County, or actually the whole county, Meeker is not on a U.S. highway at all. So you get very few people going through Meeker unless they live there or have business there. It's not like Pinedale, or even Big Piney, where people are going through on their way to the Tetons or Yellowstone, and maybe stop and have some business transactions. Meeker is very isolated, I would say, and so having all these people come in from elsewhere was a huge social and cultural issue for them.

LW: More so than what hit here.

PM: I think so.

LW: And, from what I understand and from people I've talked to, the bust was big.

PM: It was huge.

LW: It was certainly big in Big Piney because it happened so quickly.

PM: Yes.

LW: Whereas, this economic downturn, would you say it's more of a lull?

PM: I would think so, plus it's coupled with an economic downturn across the whole country. So it doesn't quite seem as devastating as it did in Meeker. When we left Meeker, we left because I got another job, but we lost thirty thousand dollars on the house that we bought and that was not uncommon. It happened with a lot of people.

LW: Because of the bust.

PM: Right.

LW: At that time nobody was wanting to buy, probably?

PM: Right, yeah. It was the typical joke in the BLM, you know, buy high, sell low. [Laughs] And that's exactly what happened.

LW: So when you came to this office in '98, that was probably a pretty quiet time, I guess?

PM: It was just before the boom. It was just before the boom we moved here in '98 and when we got here, what was happening is the Jonah EIS was just signed.

LW: And that's the Environmental Impact Statement.

PM: The Environmental Impact Statement had just been signed or just was signed after. I'm not exactly sure, but it was, like, within weeks one way or the other when I got here and, in addition to that, we were just having scoping meetings to find out what the issues were for the Pinedale Anticline Environmental Impact Statement.

LW: Ah, so they were thinking of drilling, but hadn't yet started?

PM: They were thinking of drilling. We hadn't figured out exactly how we wanted to go about the testing—the test drilling or exploratory drilling that was required for getting that EIS started. So, yeah, it was right at the beginning.

LW: But still it sounds like at that time probably busier than where you'd been before. Things were starting to step up?

PM: Yes, although we had an interesting situation in Carson City, as well, because during the time I was in Carson City, gold was an issue and, of course, in Nevada a lot of that is gold mining and so we had issues with gold and copper and silver mines in Nevada that caused some boom situations, as well. So, really, the only office that I was in that didn't experience that was Kremmling. There's never been a major boom of—energy boom in Kremmling.

LW: So Pinedale was lucky to get someone who had actually experienced this sort of thing.

PM: Well, I think one of the things they looked at when they selected me for that job was my Meeker experience, frankly, because I'd gone through that whole thing in Meeker and I had been—even though my career at that time was with archeology, I had pretty good knowledge of what went on with the drilling, what went on with the whole environment of an oil and gas boom. So I think that made a difference.

LW: Did the office then sense that something big was on the horizon?

PM: Yes and no. I mean, I think we sensed it, but I think that we had an idea that we could control it and that it wouldn't be—you know, it was really tough because I remember talking to our petroleum engineer and our geologist and nobody really knew how much was out there because, like I said, the Jonah, we'd

done some exploration and everybody pretty much figured the Jonah was going to have quite a few wells. Nobody really knew anything about the Pinedale Anticline at the time. We hadn't really done much exploratory drilling. The only thing that was known about the Anticline itself was an old well that had been drilled in the '60s and with the new technology that was developed prior to the Jonah Field, knowing how that was going to translate to use on the Pinedale Anticline, nobody really knew. We didn't know how productive those wells were going to be. We didn't have any idea of many they would be able to drill because we hadn't really allowed them to do the exploratory drilling.

What we did during the writing of the EIS was allow them to drill fourteen wells, and the reason we picked fourteen wells was basically based on where the seismic activity showed there could be productive wells, and it was basically a seven—I think it was a seven township area all the way down the spine of the Anticline. And we let them pick two wells in each of the seven townships down the Anticline, just to try and get an idea of the—

LW: Kind of delineate.

PM: extent of where this resource was, yeah. And we didn't know whether they were going to be big wells, whether they were going to be dogs, what was going to happen.

LW: I guess it was kind of like wildcatting in a—

PM: It is.

LW: Really, you just didn't know at that time?

PM: No, we didn't know. We had no idea.

LW: And this is still '98.

PM: '98, '98-99. Yeah, this was before the Environmental Impact Statement was signed.

LW: So when did it really start to hit?

PM: Well—

LW: When I say "hit" I'm talking about—well, and I guess I should ask you when did it hit and in what way did it hit your office?

PM: Well, in one way that it hit was there was a couple of those exploratory wells that were pretty big, and all of a sudden people went, "There's going to be—"

LW: They took notice.

PM: Yeah, this is going to change things here. And—

LW: The BLM took notice or the operators or both?

PM: Everybody. Everybody did. I think probably during the writing of the EIS when these exploratory wells were being drilled because one thing that the operators had agreed to was, “We’ll drill these fourteen wells and then we’ll wait until the EIS was—is signed.” Well, you know, people being who they are and the nature of the business, a couple of these wells were very lucrative and so the operators began to push, “We don’t really need to wait. Let’s—” or “We need to drill another well next to this one because we want to prove up that this is really what we think we’ve got,” and all this other stuff. So there was a lot of pressure being put on us to put aside that original commitment that was made to stay with the fourteen wells until the thing was finalized. But we did. I mean, we stayed with it, which is a good thing because people really needed to gear up. I mean, our office, when I first came to Pinedale the office had twenty-five people in it and when I left in January of 2006, we had fifty-two people.

LW: So it doubled.

PM: So it doubled, just about doubled.

LW: And then, once the EIS came out, it seems like that’s, if I’m correct, when things really bloomed.

PM: Right, because we had it on two fronts. I mean, the Jonah Field had—was already picking up speed and—while the EIS was being prepared for the Pinedale Anticline. The difference between the Jonah and the Pinedale Anticline basically was that the Jonah Field was pretty much homogenous in terms of the topography; the wells are not quite as deep as the ones on the Anticline. The resource base in a lot of ways was not quite as sensitive as the Pinedale Anticline.

LW: The environment, like the antelope and that sort of thing?

PM: Well, the Pinedale Anticline is crucial mule deer winter range. And there was no crucial winter range, as defined by Game & Fish, in the Jonah Field. Now, there are sage-grouse leks and habitat down there. There’s antelope habitat, but none of it was deemed crucial. Whereas, the sage—or the mule deer habitat is crucial habitat and so that was an issue. There were scenic issues along the escarpment of the Mesa on the Pinedale Anticline. There’s a lot of variety in the habitats starting from the north end of the Mesa going all the way down basically to within a couple miles of the Jonah Field.

So you’ve got this huge transition zone that goes thirty-some miles down to the Jonah Field. So it’s a much more widespread area, plus in addition to that, the Jonah Field is off the highway by several miles. You don’t really see it. We’ve got the north end of the Pinedale Anticline sitting right across from the town of Pinedale. So there was a lot of visual issues, as well as safety issues with increased truck traffic and industrial activity going through the town of Pinedale. So there was a lot.

LW: A lot coming at you very quickly.

PM: Yeah, yeah.

LW: How did the office handle this?

PM: [Sighs] It began fairly slowly so at first it was, “Well, we’re just—we can do this. We’ll just process through it,” and, after awhile, it became fairly overwhelming for people. People were having to spend a lot of extra time and extra hours just trying to keep up with work. It was difficult in many cases for me to make people in the state office and in Washington realize how much work we had and how understaffed we were. That was—the perception had always been Pinedale was a small office. It has a relatively small land base. I mean, it’s a million acres and there’s, you know, some of the field offices have six million acres. There was a perception that Pinedale’s resources weren’t all that special or significant and so it was very difficult to make people who have the purse strings realize that something extremely significant was happening here. The wildlife issue was a huge issue and Game & Fish really was partnering with us but they were also—they weren’t getting heard very well.

LW: So they needed more staff, too.

PM: They needed more staff. And in the middle of that whole thing, of course, administrations changed and so politics in Washington really affected the whole thing, too.

We went from being—it was interesting. Right in the middle of that whole time, we went from being an area office, and what that means is we are part of a district which was based out of Rock Springs. We went from being an area office to a field office and all the sub offices became on the same level in terms of managerial or oversight level under the state office. So, before, we had a district level that would sort of run the interference for us and then we became field offices and we went directly to the state office for assistance and help and oversight. In some respects that was a good thing; in other respects it was difficult. Incidentally, since I’ve retired they’ve gone back to making the field office an area office, basically, with Rock Springs being the intermediate level between the state office and the field. So, I don’t know how I feel about that because I’m not back involved in that. It all boils down to who is in charge of the office and how much investment they have in making sure that everyone under their supervision is being listened to.

I think, personally, I liked being—having a direct line to the state office just because the people in the office where the district is located tend to be able to be heard the loudest. It’s typical. It’s human nature. I mean, these people are right with you day-to-day and so they make their needs known. Whereas, when you’re a detached field office like Pinedale is, your voice isn’t quite as loud. I think there was a lot of things going on at that time and the politics is one of those things, how we reacted. We didn’t realize when we first got started how much political focus was eventually going to be turned onto us.

LW: Now, that happened more in the Bush Administration, if I understand the chronology.

PM: Pretty much, but I think also it happened not so much because of politics, as much as all of a sudden Pinedale was bringing a lot of money into the coffers.

LW: The state coffers.

PM: Yes. Even before Bush came in, while Clinton was still in office, we started to have people like the Director of the BLM come out to see us. So there was a lot of—you know, it started early, but it certainly heated up during the Bush Administration.

LW: And at this time, too, I think you were dealing with the older Resource Management Plan that—

PM: Right.

LW: probably wasn't helping matters too much.

PM: Right.

LW: That was a 1988 [plan], if I understand correctly.

PM: Yes. Yeah.

LW: And so on top of the busyness you needed to do a new Resource Management Plan to get this—

PM: Right. Right.

LW: It seems like that only would have added then to the pressure.

PM: That did and we did get a beefed up planning staff, a few more planners. Originally we had had one and, you know, here we are in the middle of writing an EIS and then right after we wrote it, we had to revise it again and then we had the Resource Management Plan to rewrite. Then we had a couple other Environmental Impact Statements on the table, too. So we were pretty much flooded.

We were then getting help from Washington and I would say that part of this help that we were getting was not a whole lot of help, and the reason I'm saying that is there were political agendas that were coming out of Washington that we—in their implementation we disagreed with fundamentally in terms of land management for the Pinedale area. And this was kind of late in the game. This was pretty much just before I retired, but a lot of the things that were done or decisions that were made were not really popular with the staff necessarily in the Pinedale Field Office, and I think that—again, it all gets back to money and who is in charge. It was one of my biggest frustrations and one of the reasons I finally decided to retire because I felt as though we were no longer making good decisions based on what the people in the field knew was the right thing to do, and that we were making decisions because of what we were being told was what we needed to do.

LW: Well, it seemed to me, it looked like the 2005 Energy Policy came out in, like, August 2005 and then you retired in January 2006. I was wondering how much those two went together for you?

PM: Yeah, well, a lot of—for me personally a lot of it went together because I felt as though I was no longer making decisions on the data that I had available and that everything was about energy. And I—you know, the Pinedale Field Office is an amazing treasure in terms of what the land supports. I'm not foolish enough to think that energy is shouldn't be, you know, not exploited, but developed. It is a big national treasure but we also have tremendous wildlife here and it's—I mean, the mule deer and the elk and the antelope, it's just amazing, and sage-grouse. That was another issue. In most of the rest of the West the sage-grouse populations are very much deteriorating, but they're not in this part of Wyoming. Again, recreation resources. We've got the headwaters of the Green River and access, basically entry points into the Wind River Mountains, which is internationally known. There's just tremendous

resources in this field office and then water with the Fremont Lake and all the lakes here. I've been in a lot of different offices and to me it's a special place and that was very difficult then to be compromising some of these other resources, or what I perceived to be compromising some of these other resources, for one resource.

LW: Well, and it strikes me, you know, you chose to make this your home.

PM: Right.

LW: And people who worked in that office, probably the same.

PM: Right.

LW: They weren't just workers, employees of the BLM, they were residents and it seems like that probably made the tension all the greater. Would you say?

PM: Yes, because I think a lot of people who live—like you said, live in Pinedale do because they want to be here. There were and are people that are living in Pinedale because it's a job and they want to climb up the career ladder. There were always people like that, but I would say the majority of them are not that way. They love it here and they want to be here.

LW: What was the tension? What was making that staff uncomfortable at that time?

PM: I think what was making them uncomfortable was that they would spend hours and days and weeks making arguments about how things—how to manage the land reasonably and supporting it with good data, and they would present it and be told, "No, this is not the way it's going to happen." That's what made people uncomfortable. They felt powerless. They felt as though there was already an agenda, that nobody was listening to what they had to say, and they were very frustrated. And some people left; some people just caved and just went along with the "We'll give them what they want to hear" kind of thing. Some people stayed and fought. You know, it just depends on the individual, but there was a lot of negativity and a lot of demoralized people at the time in the late—well, around 2005.

LW: And you were in a probably more of the delicate position than anyone because you were the manager, the field manager.

PM: Right.

LW: What was it like for you at that period?

PM: Well, I saw my position as being one of trying to keep people encouraged and trying to keep—trying to do things to raise people's morale. Trying to give them whatever support I could give them to keep working, to keep hammering away at, you know, what was right. We did a lot of morale things. Everybody was so busy and we'd always do—I'd always have at least one, maybe even two or three, work days where we would pick a fun project in the summer and go out and do something for recreation or do something for wildlife and we would—the whole office would basically shut down. We'd leave

one person to answer phones and we'd go out and paint picnic tables in a campground, or take fences out, or fix fish habitat up in the mountains. You know, stuff like that, just that would be fun and that people would enjoy and they'd be able to get away from the day-to-day stuff. And, you know, I spent a lot of time with employees, just trying to encourage them and try to help them get what they needed. To me that was my most important job. They're the professionals. They were always—I had a really good staff and a lot—quite a few of them are still there, but I felt that they were doing the work. They were doing the on-the-ground work and they were getting the information together that was good data and that wasn't my job was to do that. My job was just to keep those people from going crazy.

LW: To administrate, really. When did this situation really start to bubble up?

PM: Probably, I would say really in 2003. A couple years after the Anticline had been signed and now we were realizing that the spacing which originally had been forty acre spacing, the companies wanted to go down to basically five acre spacing.

LW: That's a big difference.

PM: Big difference, and so we started to realize that—and there was a well that was drilled down at the south end of the Anticline that produced incredibly more than what anybody ever thought was possible and when that well hit, everybody went, “Wow, this is huge! This is going to mean that this whole area is going to be really a big deal for the country.” You know, it became the third largest producer of natural gas in the whole country and when that happened, we knew that the situation with spacing was going to be an issue and all that stuff. So we had to kind of switch gears and try to figure out how to minimize the impact and still produce the gas, which is when the directional drilling thing came up.

So that became a whole new issue that at first the companies told us it was impossible to do and every time you came up with something like that, it was always, “Oh, no, we can't do that. It's impossible.” And we'd say things like, “Well, they've been doing it for years off the coast of Alaska and they are going out five miles. Why can't you do it here?” “Well, the rock's different here. We can't do it because the rock is different. It's harder and it's—“and, you know, it's “All the beds that contain the natural gas in Alaska are horizontal and these are all fractured. That's why you can do it in Alaska.” Well, it took a long time to find someone who would be honest enough to say, “Yeah, we can do it,” and finally you get to those people and they'd say, “Yeah, we can do it. It's going to cost more, but we can do it.” Everything costs more.

You know, you're using more technology but a lot of that you're getting it from both sides, too, because you're getting it from the industry that's telling you, “Oh, money, money, money,” and “The country needs this gas,” and then you're getting it from the environmental community who's saying, “This is it. This is the last of everything,” and neither side was correct. I mean, there was a lot of emotionalism and unsubstantiated information from the environmental community, and there's a lot of “You're cutting me in the heart,” from the oil and gas community. So you're getting it from both directions and they're both pushing their agendas and you're in the middle trying to—and that's the way I always thought.

We all in our office kind of hung together because we always felt like we were the man in middle, and so you get this team built on adverse pressure from all sides and so you become proud of what you're doing and you become somewhat cauterized against the attacks that are being made against

you because you know that everybody's got their agenda and you're just trying to find the right path down through the middle.

LW: Well, there's a couple of things that strike me. One interviewee said, "You know, the BLM was rocking along just fine and no one was paying much attention, and then once this boom hit, the microscope happened."

PM: Right.

LW: And so that's one thing, and then the second thing to me is you're in a field office in a small town. And you're not just BLM employees.

PM: Right.

LW: You're going to the grocery store and you're gassing up at Obo's convenience [store].

PM: Right.

LW: And what was that experience like in a small town?

PM: [Laughs] Well, one experience is, like, every time I went to the grocery store, I had to kind of think about what time of day I wanted to go because if you went in there right after work at five o'clock, it would be an hour before you got out of there, whether you went in to pick up a gallon of milk or not, because everybody knew who I was and everybody had something to say that they felt was very important that I needed to hear, and it was true for my employees, as well, but I particularly because they saw me as the decision-maker. They would come to me and tell me what their thoughts were about certain things. And then there were other people in the community who would really hate me, not because—they didn't even know me, but they hated me because I worked for the BLM and that kind of stuff, that happens all the time, too. People form opinions about you based on who you work for and not on who you are.

LW: And how you really might feel about the situation?

PM: Right. Right, right.

LW: Well, you just said that they perceived you as the decision-maker.

PM: Uh-hmm.

LW: But did you consider yourself the decision-maker?

PM: Only on a very low level. When it became—I mean, obviously for things like Resource Management Plans, I wasn't the decision-maker. I knew that from the very beginning.

LW: That's just the way it—that wasn't driven by this. That's just the way it is.

PM: That's the way it is. I mean, the State Director signs those and always has, and he also signs all the major EIS's, but people don't perceive that. They think that, because it's the land that you're managing, you're making the decisions about those pieces of land. The only things I ever wrote decisions on were environmental assessments, which are, in many regards, a much lower level of environmental analysis than an EIS. So even though the Pinedale Anticline EIS, I sign it, but the State Director signs over me. So I'm not really the decision-maker. All I'm saying is, "Here is the document. I've read it and I agree with this," and then, "but you need to make a decision about what you think about it," and then the State Director does. But people don't see that. They think "This is about Pinedale," so therefore you're the one that's making the decisions. So it became very volatile and there was a lot—public meetings were very, very tense many times with a lot of emotion and people actually getting heated with other people and—

LW: And we're talking 2005, 2006, probably into 2007.

PM: 2004, '03.

LW: Okay.

PM: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

LW: That early?

PM: Oh, yeah. Every time—when the Pinedale Anticline EIS first—we started having public meetings for that, it became very heated right from the beginning, including groups like Game & Fish. A lot of people from Game & Fish didn't trust that BLM would handle the habitat issues correctly. And so it wasn't just individual groups; it wasn't just the Sierra Club or, you know, the Wyoming group, it was Game & Fish, too, who is basically a pretty moderate group. And we did work things out with them. We did, but there were times when there was some trust factors or individuals that just didn't like what we were doing.

LW: Well, I was wondering how that came across from them? Was it more of an informal thing or was it this lack of trust formalized in some way?

PM: No, I would say it was more informal.

LW: A perception, perhaps?

PM: You know, perception and the good thing was is that those guys that we were working with at the time were just down the street and so we—and we put them on our task forces, too, so that they would actually see the struggles that we were going through and what the issues were. Our wildlife biologists would go and have meetings with their wildlife biologists and then the wildlife biologists would come back and say, "Well, so and so's having a real hard time with this and doesn't think that we're doing the right thing," but then they would work it out. In the end, they were supportive because they knew what the issues and, it all had to do with education and—

LW: Well, and education about what you were facing as well.

PM: Exactly.

LW: Not even just education on the resources which I guess they knew because they were biologists—

PM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LW: It was education of, “This is reality.”

PM: These are the issues. These are the issues. Yeah, that’s what I meant. It wasn’t really education in terms of the resources; it was education on what we’re facing and what the issues were.

LW: I myself didn’t totally understand the complete picture. I’m getting a clearer idea. It seems to me the channel was, of course, national to state then to you as the field office.

PM: Uh-hmm.

LW: And so I guess it was kind of like a “kill the messenger” thing for the Pinedale office.

PM: Right.

LW: You were the face in the community of policies that were coming from a broader level.

PM: Absolutely.

LW: Is that—?

PM: Absolutely. That’s the case. Just before I left, I think it was the summer of 2005, I had Rebecca Watson out, Assistant Secretary of the Interior.

LW: Yeah, probably the first time they’ve ever even been to this area.

PM: And I had Kathy—what’s her name? The Director of the BLM at the time—Kathleen? No. Anyway, the Director of the BLM was out two or three times. I mean she became a familiar face in our office.¹

LW: What did they come out for? What were they—?

PM: To give us a pep talk about energy development and what we were doing.

LW: But not so much about the resources. More like, “Keep on—“

¹ Kathleen Burton Clarke was the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior from August 21, 2001 to December 28, 2006.

PM: Well, yeah.

LW: “Keep on the good work for energy.”

PM: Right. Right, right. You know, and people resented it. People resented it because they saw—

LW: In the office?

PM: Yeah, they saw through the whole deal and they knew that this was an important thing for the administration and they knew that these people had an agenda and that they were out here to do the work that they were being told to do when they came out here. So, yeah, we had a lot of high powered attention out here for quite a long time.

LW: Not necessarily welcome, sounds like.

PM: No. Well, no, because you knew that they weren't really listening to you. They were trying to make you listen to what they were trying to tell us because they were from Washington and they knew what was good for us.

LW: Was there anyone who realized that you knew the resources better than they did? Was it always this so much top-down approach?

PM: I don't know about the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, but I think the woman who was the Director of the BLM knew, but I don't think that she—but that was not her mission, and because that was not her mission—see, those people are such political animals, they—

LW: They're political appointees.

PM: Right. They have to do—play the game. And I didn't spend a whole lot of time in Washington, but I spent enough time back there to realize that it's—if you want to make it, you've got to play the game and I'm not interested in playing those games. I'm interested in doing the right thing. And that's why a person like me stays in Pinedale and somebody like her is in Washington, and I had no intention ever of being in Washington because it's not my thing.

LW: What about the state office? Were they in line with what was being told?

PM: There is a man who was caught in the middle. Bob Bennett was—I have a lot of compassion and respect for him. I don't even know whether he's still alive or not. I haven't heard anything and he's very ill. And he knew. He knew what I was trying to do and he knew what the right thing was and the first—Al Peterson—Pearson. He died like a year after he retired because—and I think totally stress-related. And I think the same thing is true with Bob Bennett. If I thought I had it tough, those guys had it really tough because they knew what I was saying was right and they knew about the resources because they had both come up through the system and they knew.

You know, Bob Bennett was head of oil and gas, too, but he still had the right perspective and he knew what was right, but they had incredible pressure put on them from Washington. One time I

remember writing, and I can't even remember exactly what the EA was about. It was an Environmental Assessment and it had to do with the Jonah Field and it had to do with down spacing and I don't remember exactly, but I refused to sign the EA, which is very unusual and I just called Bob up and I said, "I can't sign this because it's wrong. What we're being asked to do is wrong." And he signed it for me and he—and I—you know, he never gave me a bad review or anything because I refused to sign it, but I said, "I can't do it."

LW: And he was the one who could have. I guess if there was going to be recriminations—

PM: Yeah, yeah. He didn't. No, he didn't. He signed it for me and he never chastised me for not signing it. So, I don't know. I mean, those things, you take—you got to look at your whole life and I look at guys like Al Pearson who died a year after he left and Bob Bennett whose health, if he isn't—hasn't died yet, it's obviously taken a huge downturn and a tremendous toll on his life, and I just think it's not worth it to me. I can't play that game just so I can sit in a huge corner office.

LW: Has it taken a toll on your life?

PM: It did. It did for a long time. When I left BLM, I was thirty pounds heavier than I am now. I was not exercising. I was sitting at that computer. I had headaches and my whole life was consumed by the whole thing and that's one of the reasons I decided to leave when I did. It was that I was just physically, as well as mentally, just drawn, drained.

LW: Was there something that was the breaking point, that you said, "This is it. I've had it?"

PM: No, I think it was more a gradual decision over the final two years of my employment where I sat down and I went, "Okay, I can retire at age sixty with twenty-five years and keep my sanity or I can stay to get a few more dollars in my retirement and maybe drop dead at my desk," and that was basically where I was at because it just became increasingly obvious to me that if I stayed, I was just going to take more of the same and I just didn't want to do it.

LW: There was something that we were talking about earlier I'd like to go back to. Another, I guess you'd say revelation for me, although maybe I'm just naïve, but as I've been reading these reports over time, I've been seeing how much the technology has advanced and the operators are saying, "You know, we're doing this. We're doing"—you know, "the horizontal or the directional drilling."

PM: Directional drilling.

LW: "And we're doing mats and we're doing liquid gathering systems," and I thought, "Oh, well, good, they're thinking the right way," but then I'm getting the impression, well, maybe it was more pressure on them to do the right thing, than maybe pressure on their own parts to do the right thing.

PM: I believe it is pressure on them to do the right thing, and you know what? There is some tremendous stuff being done now.

LW: It seems like it.

PM: It is. I mean, when you can go up there—and it makes me happy, but I think it was definitely pressure on them from the environmental community and from BLM to do the right thing. Let's face it, money is what drives industry. It always has. We have a capitalistic economy and I—that's okay with me. I think that's a whole lot better than other systems elsewhere. Unfortunately, there's very few companies that really want to do the right thing. There are a few and those companies are doing some tremendous things, but they're big companies and they're companies that have a lot of money. And they have money for research and development. But drilling sixteen wells on one pad and having everything consolidated or doing like this in the Jonah they do remote drilling and they run the lines out to these little satellite pads? It's great. You know, they're doing—and reclamation is coming a long way from where it was before, and again, they won't do it unless BLM says, "Okay, we want to see that this reclamation looks just like it did before you set foot out here. We don't want you putting a bunch of grass seed and—"

LW: That's not even native or is just grass.

PM: Yeah, and calling it good. "We want to see a mixture of native shrubs and forbs and grass, you know." And it worked. I mean it's working and there are companies that are very willing to do it, and there are other companies that are going to fight you tooth and nail all the way along. But the bottom line is there are some wonderful things that are happening and it isn't as bad as it was.

I remember some of the environmental folks saying at one time, "Oh, you know, this antelope range and the antelope are just going to be devastated." Heck, you can go down there in those fields and the antelope are standing around, looking at you. They're standing—I have some great shots of antelope just standing right on the pads looking at you like, "Hey, you know, it's pretty nice out here. I can see a long way." They're fine and if you look at the numbers, they're fine. So, it's not as bad as originally people wanted to say.

Part of that, I think—that's why BLM—that's why in spite of the fact that I finally had to retire after twenty-five years, I was always—I've always been proud of BLM and I've always been—of all the agencies, I liked working for BLM and I wouldn't have worked for any of the other ones. Maybe Forest Service, but probably not. But because I think they're trying to balance things. They're trying to live in the real world and balance between development and conservation.

LW: And I think, you know, people should realize that is the role of the BLM. It's a multiple use.

PM: Yeah.

LW: I mean, there is an aspect, of course, of protection and that's part of the use I guess you could say, but it's not—the balance I think is the key in what the BLM does.

PM: Right, exactly.

LW: I was wondering about the chain that leads to some of the, say, the pressure on the operators and how much public comment makes a difference? And I was—there was something I was reading, one of the

articles a gentleman said, “Well, I don’t know why we bother to comment to the BLM, they don’t listen to us anyway.”

PM: Uh hmm.

LW: What would you say to that kind of—?

PM: People who have a good argument—all arguments are listened to. If it’s based on emotion and there’s nothing to back it up, then, yeah, there’s not going to be a whole lot of credence given to that. If somebody has a good idea, those were always listened to. Most of the comments we would get would be based on emotionalism and based on total negativity and just opportunities to slam the BLM. But, out of all those hundreds of comments we would get, we would read each one and there were always a couple that were good information that we could use. And then there’s always a few people who you—before you even open the letter, you know what they’re going to say. So, basically, those are the folks who make statements like you just said. But you read them all. I mean, they were all read. They were all considered, some for about two seconds and some for a long time, and sometimes there were suggestions that were excellent and were put into practice.

LW: Did you ever feel like they got it? That it needs to be constructive, or did it just continue to be emotional, emotional?

PM: It depends. Some people did get it, and some people were constructive in their criticism, but there’s always a few people who just have an axe to grind and that’s the way it is.

LW: And they’ll grind the axe.

PM: Yeah, for whatever reason or whatever topic, they’ll keep it up. [Laughs]

LW: Right. Well, there was an article that quoted you, I think it was in the *Sublette Examiner*, and it mentioned a couple things that you were really proud of during your time at the BLM and one was the Pinedale Anticline Working Group. Was that your creation or something that you were intimately involved in?

PM: I was involved in forming it, yes, and it was something that I can’t say that it was my idea, per se, but I worked with the first people that were involved in it and there was a lot of—what I was proud of was the way everybody worked together and how we all helped educate each other on what our concerns were and what we wanted to see out of this project. And I was just—I think what encouraged me was the fact that people with very different agendas could all come together and sit down and really listen to each other and, as a result of listening to each other, come up with some really workable solutions for some of those problems. That was the first time, I think, that anything like that had really been done. Well, there was a couple of examples. There was one up in Alaska, I think, and there was another one in Oregon that was basically similar to what we had. But those groups are really important because they might not change their constituent’s ideas, but they do help the group come together with reasonable

recommendations for how to make things work. And I think that's why we're seeing things like directional drilling and reclamation with native species and all that that's really been a success, I think.

LW: And, to back up a little bit because you know more about this than the average person, the Pinedale Anticline Working Group system was part of I think a broader whole of the Adaptive Environmental Management System.

PM: Right.

LW: Can you just talk about that a little bit? What the goals of that system were and how that—I'm going to call it PAWG, so I don't have to keep calling it its whole name—how that worked within that system?

PM: Well, basically that was to take the decisions that were made in the Environmental Impact Statement—

LW: And this is 2000?

PM: 2001 I think was the final. Well, maybe it was 2000.

LW: That was the—it was a Resource Management Plan that came out in 2000 that established—

PM: Oh. Oh, oh, yes.

LW: Is that correct?

PM: 2001. And it was the Environmental Impact Statement. Not the RMP.

LW: Okay.

PM: The whole idea was that during the implementation phase of the decisions in the Environmental Impact Statement that there would be a constant monitoring of the effectiveness of those decisions, and the reason for that was that we really didn't know what the impacts were going to be on all the resources because, as I said a lot earlier, there were only fourteen wells drilled at that time, before the decision was signed. So we didn't know what a lot of these impacts were going to be. So when we made the decision, when the Record of Decision was signed, a lot of those requirements were made with the idea that maybe they were going to need to be changed or modified, depending on what we saw with these impacts. And so that working group was basically created to look at the decisions, see if they were still appropriate and whether or not they needed to be changed, and then make recommendations to whoever the decision-maker is at that time to change those if they thought they needed to be changed. And so that was what was great about it, was as the field developed, then there were some changes that were made as a result of this. And I think, part of that was the directional drilling.

LW: That was a recommendation, say, of one of the task—from what I understand, there were task groups within the PAWG system.

PM: Right, yes. There was one for air quality. There was one for wildlife. There was a whole bunch of different—and some of the groups actually disbanded because they weren't really that necessary. I think there was one for archeology and archeology has a bunch of very specific rules and so it didn't fit well into that whole scheme of things. But some of the social issues were—

LW: Because there was, maybe is, a socioeconomic task group.

PM: Task group, right. And they talked about—especially—you know, things changed that we had no comprehension of with the culture and nature of the town. And, yes, it was driven by a decision that was made by the BLM to allow this huge field to be developed. So there was a lot of discussion on those kinds of issues that the task group under the PAWG got involved in.

LW: I know the BLM office took a lot of heat, it seemed—

PM: It did.

LW: over that—the socioeconomic impact. What are your thoughts on that?

PM: I guess life changes and, yes, we could have not developed the field, but since we did and there's people that welcomed the change and, of course, there's always people that want it to stay the same. One of the things we took heat over probably more than anything else is that they wanted us to have more involvement in how social change was administered and we took a position of, "That's not our job. We're the land managers. We will support this change, but we'll go to the people in the community that really need to be involved, people like the county and even support groups, EMTs and all the people that are really involved in the social aspects of the community. Mental health counseling and all those people." We didn't want the community to give us that kind of power because that's not what our job is. Our job is land management and we will support the social structure of the community and making changes, but in terms of us administering it, no.

LW: Well, I was wondering what kind of involvement were they wanting from the BLM. What was the expectation that you should be doing? You said possibly "administering?" But I wonder if there would have been resentment if you had tried?

PM: Oh, there would have. There would have, and rightly so. I mean, but I think there were things—oh, I don't know. [Sighs] I'm trying to think now what one of them was. Just things like administering the development of more recreation opportunities for people because of feeling like we've brought all these people into the area and there's—and so therefore we need to have stronger involvement with BLM to create recreation opportunities for people. There were some other ones, too, but I'd really have to dig back into some stuff that I can't remember anymore. But there were—

LW: But I guess the gist was there sounds like a hands-on participation was wanted.

PM: Right.

LW: Although maybe not exactly knowing what that would look like.

- PM: Well, and there was a socioeconomic task group, but BLM kept trying to back away from that one because we felt like that's not our mission, and, "We're glad you're doing it, but you guys need to take that responsibility yourselves because we're a land managing agency." And they kept trying to draw us into that task force and we kept saying, "No, we don't want to be involved in that one."
- LW: Well, it makes me wonder what the relationship was with the BLM office and the, say, Sublette County Commissioners. Was there a tension because of these impacts? Or not just the Commission, of course, town officials, as well.
- PM: Right. Well, we had a good working relationship but it was basically one of—it wasn't about big, broad-based things. It was more like with the County Commissioners of, "Well, so-and-so wants to approve upgrading this country road," or something very fundamental and very material. We sat on a county planning—I sat on a county planning effort that they did with zoning and basically tried to help them understand why zoning was a good idea and why we needed to have a plan that would lay out where certain things would be appropriate and other things wouldn't be. But the County Commissioners again, being very political on a very small, low scale, didn't want to step on certain people's toes and so therefore the zoning document that they ultimately came up with was basically ineffective, and it's still there. Sublette County is one of the few counties in the state that has no building department. They have no building department and they have no—
- LW: No building inspectors?
- PM: No.
- LW: That seems dangerous.
- PM: It is dangerous and there's a lot of dangerous buildings in this community, but I mean that's off the subject, but that gives you an idea of basic attitude of the County Commissioners, and that is "Less government is better" and "We're proud of the fact that we—this is the Cowboy State and we're proud of the fact that we have very little regulation." Someday it's going to bite them and probably not going to be too much in the distant future because now we do have a lot of different people in this community and a culture that is changing and incorporating many cultures from a lot of different places, and more and more people and it's going to bite them.
- LW: It's going to drive change.
- PM: It's going to drive change. And you can either plan for it or you can stick your head in the sand, and my opinion is that they have stuck their head in the sand and that's the place they like it.
- LW: Did you find that to be the case on the city level, Big Piney, Pinedale?
- PM: The cities have very little power, I think. Basically, the County Commissioners drive pretty much everything. I don't know how the latest mayor for either Big Piney or Pinedale, how they function. I was very close to Rose when she was the mayor.

LW: Yeah, Rose Skinner.

PM: She was a wonderful woman and she had a vision for what was going on and so, again, it was pretty easy to work with her, but after she left, I don't know.

LW: Well, and I think she left about the time you retired.

PM: Yeah, just shortly after.

LW: And then Steve Smith became mayor.

PM: Right. Yeah, and I don't know how much power they actually have.

LW: Well, and probably—I've heard one of the problems is money. The county has the pocketbook.

PM: The money goes to the county.

LW: And the towns less so and so there's that tension, as well.

PM: Right. Exactly.

LW: So it's not just a tension between the BLM and the County Commission, it's a tension that was there before this energy boom probably ever hit.

PM: Exactly. It's been there a long time and, again, we worked with more the county basically because the town basically encompasses most—is private land, obviously. Whereas, the county spreads across everything and so we didn't work that much with the towns at all.

LW: There was something that our conversation triggered. You mentioned in a 2004 *Pinedale Roundup* article that "housing growth has put more pressure on us," meaning the Pinedale Field Office, "as we manage the remaining open space." What were you seeing to make that comment?

PM: Part of it was this whole idea that there's a finite amount of private land and there was a lot of pressure to release some of the public land for development purposes.

LW: Pressure from?

PM: From the community, from the county that kind of thing. So we received some of that. I would say, looking back on it, it probably wasn't as bad as I made in that statement. It was probably at that point there was—we were getting a lot of pressure to release that.

LW: Something was happening, uh-hmm.

- PM: I know one of the things was the golf course issue, and that's still up in the air. Who knows what's going to happen with that, but they wanted some public land released for a recreation and public purposes grant to the county or to the organization to develop a golf course on public land.
- LW: How does the office handle those types of requests?
- PM: It's a perfectly legitimate application and if there can be shown that there is a need and there is—that's the best alternative for that kind of thing, it's definitely considered and in many cases has been granted. The problem with the golf course is that nobody has ever come up with, "Well, how are you going to pay for this? And how are you going to develop this?"
- LW: Ah, the maintenance, I guess.
- PM: Yeah, all that stuff has to be looked at. You don't just go turning public land over to people and then they have no good plan as to what they're going to do with it. So, anyway, it's definitely a viable thing. Recreation and public purposes has been on the books for a long time and there is the industrial site out west of town was a recreation and public purposes designation.
- LW: Now, is that a decision that you can make locally or does that also have to come from the state and be signed off on?
- PM: That has to come from the state because you're basically taking public land out of public ownership.
- LW: A big decision, I guess you could say.
- PM: Right. Right.
- LW: And kind of jumping around a little bit, getting back to the Pinedale Anticline Working Group, did it succeed in the way that you had hoped? Did it work in the way that you had wanted it to?
- PM: I think so. I mean, I don't even know the status of it now. I don't know whether they're still going on or—
- LW: From what I understand—looking at the newspapers.
- PM: I think they evolved over time and I think that things change, but I think it—yeah, I do because I think, like I said, the best thing about it was educating all the members and getting people to come to reasonable decisions about change and about—you have a very fluid document which that decision was for the Pinedale Anticline and I think people—it helped all interests understand what the issues were before decisions were made to modify it. And I think their input has helped modify those decisions.
- LW: And we're talking here about citizens.
- PM: Exactly.

LW: Local residents.

PM: Local residents.

LW: And it's not—you know, of course there are some representatives from, well, maybe industry, I don't know.

PM: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

LW: Okay, industry representation and—

PM: Yeah, and the town. And the county.

LW: But there's that citizen involvement.

PM: Absolutely. Local.

LW: Let's see, we've actually talked a lot about the things that I had on my interview list, just through our conversation. Well, let me ask you on this one, you know, the winter drilling was of course a really big topic. The year-round drilling.

PM: Uh-hmm.

LW: If you could talk about that, what was happening in the Pinedale office and what kind of pressures or tensions might have been associated with that?

PM: Well, that goes back to the crucial mule deer winter range issue. That was really the big factor that caused—well, that was the moratorium that we placed on winter drilling that we had from the very beginning was from November 15th to May 30. And the mule deer and, again, based on numbers from Game & Fish, the mule deer were and probably are impacted more by the drilling than any other species. The antelope just don't appear to be impacted, but the mule deer herds have been going down since—

LW: They're hardwired to be in that area, I guess.

PM: Right, and so those areas were important to preserve and deer are not as adaptable to human presence as the antelope appear to be. So, on the other hand, the economics of shutting these huge rigs that take sixty days to drill to depth are—shutting them down in the winter is difficult and so we finally came up with a compromise that they would be allowed to drill year long in certain areas, but not all over the Mesa.

Right now they're basically year-round down at the south end and—the whole thing is they'll go from one area to another area and concentrate this activity in one particular place before they move up. And I don't think—well, at least my understanding is they're not ever going to let them drill year-round up at the north end because that's where the most important habitat is for the mule deer. Whereas, in the south end it's just not as important.

- LW: And we're talking about the core development area. They're within that core development area, there's places that they kind of push them down to drill. Is that correct for year-round drilling?
- PM: Well, yes. Yes, the whole Anticline is—well, there's a target area up at the north end, which there's rigs out there right now, but those rigs have to be done by November 15th or be close to being down. I mean, sometimes for safety reasons, etcetera, they can't be off of there until maybe December 1st. The wildlife biologists go out and they check and they make sure that—depending on the season, usually. We've had mild winters in the last ten years and so things are not as hard on those animals by the first of December as maybe twenty-five years ago. So they let them go a couple more weeks, but under no circumstances are they going to let them drill in there year—or winter long. Whereas, on the south end the habitat is different and they can let them go. As long as they're confined to one pad or two pads, they can let them go year round. That was a closely argued decision and one that the Game & Fish was very reluctant to allow to happen, but we—they also were very involved in that decision and they are monitoring it really carefully. So, I think they've felt that it's okay. It's okay at the south end.
- LW: Well, I'm curious about the Wyoming Game & Fish and we're talking BLM land, how much authority does a state agency have when it comes to that land?
- PM: Well, actually they don't have any authority over the land, but they are responsible—their mission is the animals. It's a very interesting dance and it's definitely a partnership. The Game—BLM always has to remind themselves that they don't manage the wildlife, they manage the habitat for the wildlife. The Game & Fish manage the wildlife. So it's got to be a partnership because, if the land is destroyed, the animals are obviously going to be destroyed and so it's definitely—they have all the authority over the animals but none of the authority over the land.
- LW: Okay, that's a clearer picture, too. And I noticed that one of the complaints that the Governor had about the 2007 draft of, you'll have to correct me, I guess the Environmental Impact Statement—was that he said the BLM wasn't working with some of the agencies, the state agencies. And it sounds like the BLM has to think about that aspect. They need to have to remember, “Oh, yeah, we do need to cooperate.”
- PM: Right. And I think the BLM knows they have to work with those agencies. It may be—and again, it all goes back to at what level of BLM are they not working with people. I mean, is this—the BLM almost—I can't imagine the BLM not working with the Game & Fish or DEQ for air quality. I mean, they do. Working with them and doing everything they ask are two different things, you know.
- LW: There are some things—well, as we have talked about. There's a certain agenda coming down to a field office.
- PM: Absolutely.
- LW: You have to recognize that, as well.

- PM: Right. There's agendas on both sides and the agenda that the BLM in Washington has may not interface well with the agenda that the DEQ has in Cheyenne.
- LW: How does that process work? How do those negotiations happen on the ground?
- PM: Oh, meetings, definitely. I mean, it's—you know, we spent—when I was there, we spent hours in meetings in Cheyenne with DEQ and with Game & Fish and all the other—
- LW: It's a drive into Cheyenne, huh?
- PM: Oh, yeah. Always. I know every sagebrush between here and Cheyenne. [Laughs] But it's face to face, telephone calls. And, you know, the governor is a political animal, too, and he's going to make statements like, "The BLM isn't cooperating with the state agencies," because he—well, of course, now he's not going to get reelected but he still wants to keep his policies going. So everybody has—says stuff to make their appeal to their constituents and so—I think for the most part we have a really good relationship with the State of Wyoming.
- LW: Well, I was wondering how that is with, you know, a state that's state's rights and proud of it.
- PM: Right.
- LW: What is it like to manage federal land in a state that has a long tradition of that?
- PM: Well, all I know is, working with [Governor] Freudenthal, he was wonderful. I mean, he's very intelligent and I think he understands definitely that Wyoming needs the federal government to manage their land because they don't have enough people to do it themselves. And I think there's always those soap box things, but in reality how could the State of Wyoming actually manage that land, all those millions of acres with the population base that we have?
- LW: So maybe it's more posturing—
- PM: Oh, I think it is.
- LW: than reality.
- PM: Yeah, I definitely do.
- LW: Well, we have covered a lot of territory in our talk. Let me just ask you one other thing. And I don't know how much how this has an effect on the Pinedale Office. The Minerals Management Service. Now revamped with the Obama Administration. What was your relationship with that agency?
- PM: Pretty peripheral. Our petroleum engineer probably had more work with them than anybody else, but part of what MMS did would come to us through Washington, and so our involvement would probably be masked by what people in Washington were asking of us to do. There was no real direct involvement, I would say, with the Pinedale Field Office.

LW: Okay, I was just wondering. And one reason I thought about it is, I don't remember who said it, but they said, "Yeah, I think Dick Cheney was calling the Pinedale Field Office and telling them this is how it's going to be."

PM: No, not Dick Cheney, but definitely—oh, why can't I remember her name?

LW: Oh, the one who was—?

PM: Kathleen. She was. I remember talking to her personally and I'm thinking, "What other field manager is talking to her personally?" And it was just all because of the royalties and that whole issue, which of course MMS is involved in.

LW: Yeah, right.

PM: But that's how we would get it. We wouldn't, at our level, get directly involved with MMS.

LW: Okay, I just was curious how that worked, as well. Well, and just I guess a couple of just final questions. How did the boom affect you personally?

PM: Personally, I guess—

LW: I guess everyday life is more where I'm coming from.

PM: Yeah, that's—I know that's where you're kind of getting at and I'm thinking it's not the small town that I moved to. I definitely like being in a small town. It's hard for people who basically like to be in more or less isolated situations, like myself and my husband, to go into the grocery store now, for example—the sense of community has changed. I mean, you go into the grocery store now and you hardly ever see anybody you know. And, in spite of the fact that I used to complain about going in and having to spend an hour buying a gallon of milk, at least you could catch up with people and talk to people. If it wasn't about what you were doing to rape and pillage the environment, you were talking about your kids and how they were doing and stuff like that, and that seems to have changed. It's not the same tight knit community that it was twelve years ago.

In terms of other things? I don't know. I think that it's been a source of economic stability for us. For my husband, who is a contractor, now things are slowing down and he doesn't have the same workload that he had, but it affected us in a positive way that way. And actually still is because we're both involved in the reclamation aspect.

LW: And I should say you haven't truly retired—?

PM: No.

LW: Retired from the BLM but, still, you have your own business. You and your husband.

PM: Right, so we're still—you know, it's been a positive economic affect on us and—

LW: And you said reclamation is your focus?

PM: Yeah, we're doing reclamation on the well pads and on pipelines.

LW: What are you seeing out there?

PM: We're very fortunate. We're working with one of the companies that's doing things the right way. In fact, that's the only way we would do it, actually. But it's exciting what's going on because we're working with people that are soil scientists and microbiologists and because we're working for a company that's got money and is willing to invest in research, we're seeing some tremendous results. We have well pads that were reclaimed last fall that have sagebrush that's that tall on it already and it's because of how we're doing the work and the kinds of people that we've consulted with from all over the country who are really experts in the field. And so it's kind of like directional drilling, we're doing, I think, a great job and it's showcasing what can be done and what really needs to be done in order for the habitat to be restored. Not just throwing grass out there.

LW: In that area of reclamation, there'll probably be some that are good stuff and others that, not so much?

PM: That's the way it is.

LW: I wonder, will public pressure push that along, as well, like it's pushed technology to improve drilling techniques?

PM: I hope so.

LW: Will it push the reclamation?

PM: I hope so. I hope BLM—

LW: Are you seeing anything like that?

PM: Well, I think BLM is going to be the key. If they continue to require the companies to do what they told the companies they were going to have to do in reclamation, it will push it along. If they compromise and allow less than what they said they were going to require, then the companies will only do what they can get away with basically. Because it's money. And so, if BLM holds their feet to the fire and sees that it's possible to do what they've been asking them to do, it will work.

LW: And again, I guess this will come more national—or state versus local, the push.

PM: [Sighs] I think so, but—well, I don't know because it's all part of this—the task force, like the Jonah one and the PAWG and those. If they take a hard look at what the results are, then they will, you know, push BLM to—

LW: They'll have an influence to—?

PM: Yeah, they should. I mean, that's the way it's supposed to work and has worked in many cases in the past. So, yeah.

LW: Do you think we're going to get another boom out here? Are we in a lull?

PM: Yeah. Yeah, maybe lull's a good word. It's certainly—I don't say—it's not way dropped off, but it's stabilized. I think it's possible. I mean there's—again, it's going to be requiring—it's going to be dependent on technology because there's more gas out there, but it's very, very deep. And, just like that breakthrough before the Jonah was developed, it will require some very substantial technological advances to be able to get that real deep gas. I mean, there's gas down twenty to twenty-five thousand feet deep and they can't economically get that out at this point, but there's a lot of it and so depending on where we're at with our commitment to natural gas, will depend on how driven they are to get there.

LW: Yeah. Do you think the BLM's ready for that?

PM: No.

LW: No?

PM: I don't think so. I mean, I don't know. It depends on—I guess it depends on the—how that translates into what's happening on the surface. You know, if they can do it without significantly changing pad size and stuff like that, yeah, I guess the BLM's ready for it. It depends on what's going to happen. If they're going to start talking about making parking lots out there, then, no, I would say they're not ready for it. But, who knows what that technology will actually involve in terms of the physical aspects of drilling.

LW: Yeah, it's kind of like what you were faced with in 1998. You weren't quite sure.

PM: Exactly.

LW: And one final question. What would you like to have seen happen differently?

PM: Oh, wow.

LW: In hindsight.

PM: That's a tough question. Of course, I think one easy answer is to have more time to have been able to digest what was happening. Maybe also more cooperation between Washington and the field office would definitely have been an advantage. Reality, I don't know. I mean, when you're talking political situations that are apart from, you know, what the right way to do things are. Whether you can ever realize that kind of a result, I don't know. But it would have been nice to have more support from Washington and less direction from Washington.

LW: Support staff, I guess.

PM: Staff and just support for the recommendations that were given.

LW: Ah. Philosophical support.

PM: Right, philosophical and—and yeah. I mean, I think there was a lot of rational argument that was made and good science that was done that was basically ignored because there was an agenda.

LW: Yeah. Well, to wind things up, is there something we haven't talked about that you want people to know? Researchers who might listen to this fifty years from now.

PM: You know, I do think—and this is not from the BLM perspective. This is from a person living here. I think one of the biggest impacts with the boom and bust economy is on the social structure of the community, and I don't think people are ever prepared for what happens when a lot of money is brought into a place and the changes that happen as a result of that. I'm not sure exactly what can be done up front, but I think that looking at these kind of cases, with what happens to the community is important and I think that—I just look at how small towns evolve from being a small town and having face-to-face understanding of who the people are that are making the decisions for the town, and where they come from. I mean, that's usually the way it is when you're in a really small town, and then you transition into a bigger town with a lot of money and you don't know who's making those decisions and you don't know where they're coming from. That's kind of a scary thing and that's when things start to happen that maybe aren't in the best interest of the culture of that area.

So I think, to me, that's the greater impact than whether or not the sagebrush is being impacted or, you know. When you go basically from having a town that has people that—you've got your resident alcoholics, but then when you come and you add a whole drug scene in that's never been really anything in the community, that's a huge deal. Or you go and have—I'm sure you may have read or heard about this guy that's been going around Pinedale and beating up women?

LW: No. Recently?

PM: Yes. This summer, where there's someone—and I don't know that they've caught him yet. I don't think so. Who has been breaking into houses and beating up women and leaving. Just beating them up, not raping them. Just beating them up and leaving. And this has never been an issue. I mean, this is a small town and you have things like this happening, or you have—I'm sure you've talked to your mental health professionals and there's more and more family abuse and more and more drug and alcohol problems. You know, those are all things that a small town used to be able to take care of themselves internally and now it's way beyond that. It's—and how you deal with that, I don't know. But I think that's the biggest impact and that's because of people who come from the outside who have a lot of baggage, who've been probably in a different culture than what we're used to here. Yeah.

LW: Well, one thing that strikes me is, you know, Wyoming has gone through so many booms and busts.

PM: Right.

LW: Is there a model?

PM: Right.

LW: Did Sublette County officials ask Sweetwater County officials or Lincoln County officials, for that matter, “How did you handle that?”

PM: No, I don’t think so.

LW: But I wonder why.

PM: I don’t know. And I don’t know whether that is—

LW: And I don’t know if it would even help, because I don’t quite know—

PM: No. Part of it is the whole deal with “We’re independent. We have the cowboy spirit. We’re not going to ask somebody else.” That’s part of it. Part of it is I think that you’re in the middle of it before you realize that you’re in the middle of it and it just kind of happens to you and you react. And you just keep reacting and all of a sudden you think, then you have time to sit back and look at it.

LW: Yeah, realize, “Oh, I’m in a boom.”

PM: Right. Right. So, you know, those are two things that may keep you from looking at somebody else’s past history.

LW: Yeah, that’s true and I guess it’s always been that way. But hopefully, say in Eastern Wyoming, if we get the Niobrara oil play, they may not hopefully make some of the same mistakes.

PM: Well, you know, right now Pennsylvania, that whole thing. That’s in a very small sort of rural area of Pennsylvania. I haven’t heard anybody from Pennsylvania’s been calling Pinedale to ask them what’s happening, but they’re in the middle of it now.

LW: Well, thank you, Prill. This has been a wonderful interview.

PM: Oh, thank you.

LW: It really has, and if you have—if you don’t have anything else to add, we’ll—

PM: I can’t think of anything right now, but if I do, I’ll call you.

LW: Okay, good. Thank you.

[End of Interview]