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## **Researcher pins blame for grouse on drought**

**By Jim Gransbery**

An environmental researcher said Monday that drought "is the big driver" when measuring detrimental effects on sage grouse populations.

Renee Taylor, of Taylor Environmental Consulting in Casper, Wyo., spoke during a presentation to the Montana Petroleum Association's annual meeting in Billings. She listed conclusions of her examination of seven study areas across Wyoming where oil and gas development has occurred over the past 30 to 40 years.

She is preparing a professional research paper that should be completed in six weeks and will be made available for critical analysis and peer review, she said.

Taylor said sage grouse have maintained their breeding grounds, called leks, over time in existing oil and gas fields. Despite loss of habitat, intense activity and drought, the average number of sage grouse males is basically the same now as in 1970, she said.

Environmental groups in recent years have sought to list the sage grouse as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service denied that request in 2005, which resulted in a federal lawsuit in Idaho. A judge's decision is pending from a July 9 hearing.

Taylor concluded that despite more than 30 years of oil and gas development, the sage grouse leks remain in the fields; that fewer leks remain in areas that have more than 10 wells in a 2-mile radius of the leks; that the density of the wells affects the number of males attending the leks; that males may abandon the leks where there is high intensity and dense development; that populations have remained consistent in Wyoming regardless of the intensity; that consistent stipulations by government agencies on energy development reduce the effects on the grouse; and that precipitation "is the big driver."

Taylor, in response to a question, said she has concluded that drought has a greater impact than energy development.

Nevertheless, she said the industry can reduce its effect on grouse by limiting its disturbance of landscape, by mapping grouse habitat and avoiding it if possible and by effective reclamation. Her research shows re-colonization occurs after wells have been abandoned.

There is dispersal of the birds during development, but reclamation encourages their return, she said.

She said that in some areas the use of coalbed methane water has been used to "kick-start" restoration.

The forum featured speakers from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Department of the Interior, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Montana office of the Bureau of Land Management.

In Montana, FWP Director Jeff Hagener said, the population of the bird is stable, which he attributed to favorable climate over the past decade. While drought has been a mainstay in Montana in recent years, good weather at the right time of year has kept the sage grouse population at an estimated 90,000 to 130,000 for the past decade.

Hagener said the real threat to the grouse was from habitat conversion.

"The oil and gas industry should not be singled out" for habitat loss, he said. Farming and ranching, highways, subdivisions, grazing and fires have contributed. Hagener said Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Oregon have suffered critical burns, and recovery has been slow in those states.

He said a landowner incentive program has provided 175,000 acres of core, critical habitat that has set aside sagebrush areas across the state. The federal program has been discontinued for lack of money, he said.

Hagener said another program of landowner conservation management involves an agreement between the state and the Fish and Wildlife Service in which landowners who have conserved critical habitat will not retroactively come under the regulations of the Endangered Species Act if sage grouse are eventually declared endangered.

He said, too, that the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission had raised the bag limit for sage grouse to four but recently reduced it to two.

He suggested that, instead of listing the sage grouse as endangered in all 11 Western states, only those with endangered populations be included. Montana should be allowed to continue its own management, he said.

"It is unfair to penalize states that are doing the job," he said.