



July 4, 2007

Studies: Drilling imperils grouse

By Dustin Bleizeffer

New research results released Tuesday outline a grave situation for sage grouse in the Powder River Basin.

The peer-reviewed studies, by University of Montana professor Dave Naugle and other researchers, may lead to big changes wherever the bird shares habitat with energy development.

Among the findings: From 2000 to 2005, sage grouse populations where there is coal-bed methane activity declined by 86 percent, whereas populations outside coal-bed methane development areas declined by 35 percent.

According to the studies, the current density and pace of coal-bed methane development is devastating sage grouse populations in the Powder River Basin, "over and above those of habitat loss caused by wildfire, sagebrush control, or conversion of sagebrush to pasture or cropland."

The Bureau of Land Management issued a press release Tuesday, promising to take the new information into account in future decisions regarding the management of energy development.

"On the heels of Wyoming's Sage Grouse Summit in Casper last week, the results of these peer-reviewed studies will help inform management decisions in Wyoming in the months and years to come," Wyoming BLM Director Bob Bennett said. "The BLM encourages anyone interested in sage grouse to familiarize themselves with this important research."

BLM spokesman Steven Hall said it's too early to say exactly how the agency may modify permit stipulations based on the new research. Hall stressed that any action BLM takes will be in cooperation with other agencies and stakeholders.

"It's not something BLM can do on its own," Hall said.

The Petroleum Association of Wyoming declined to comment on the results of the studies Tuesday.

Critics of the BLM's management of oil and gas activity in Wyoming said the study results prove what the industry and the BLM have ignored for years.

"This is a real wake-up call to BLM that they are going to have to make serious changes in the way they are permitting the design of oil and gas projects throughout the range if they want to prevent that bird from heading to extinction," said Erik Molvar, biologist for the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.